University of Alberta

"And then the hack takes a few bites out of the baby!": The reception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the media outrage sparked by the initial production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1995 as well as the reception of the Graeae Theatre Company's production of the play in 2006/07. Performance texts are reconstructed by drawing on archival photos, interviews with members of the production teams and critical reviews. These reconstructions are located within a socio-cultural-historical frame and draw on audience and reader reception theories to offer a semiotic and phenomenological analysis of the critical print media reception to both the initial and 2006/07 productions. In turn, this analysis explores the specific mechanics of provocation at work in both the script and the performance texts. The analysis of the Graeae Theatre Company's production also examines the aesthetic implications of using actors with physical disabilities.

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Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to Cheryl Plummer, Rose Plummer and Janet Plummer without whose support it would never have been written.

Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 1
Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Socio-cultural Historical Context	p. 9
Chapter Two: Audience Reception of the Initial Production of *Blasted* 1995	p. 37
Chapter Three: The Audience Reception of Graeae Theatre Company's *Blasted* 2006/07	p. 73
Conclusion	p. 100
Bibliography	p. 107

List of Figures

Figure 1: *Bullet Hole* p. 19

Figure 2: Before the Blast (1995) p. 43

Figure 3: After the Blast (1995) p. 47

Figure 4: Before the Blast (2006/07) p. 80

Figure 5: After the Blast (2006/07) p. 81

Introduction

Within the western theatrical community, the name of playwright Sarah Kane is synonymous with shock and outrage. In 1995, the debut of her play *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre in London prompted an overwhelming backlash of moral indignation in the press. Theatre critics were vying to write the most damning critique of the play, condemning it on the basis of its use of explicit violence and in their eyes its seemingly poor construction. This outraged response was not merely confined to theatrical reviews in the arts section of the newspaper, but actually became a front page feature story during the week of January 16th in 1995. Within a matter of days following its debut, *Blasted* and its author were catapulted from relative obscurity to the centre of a media controversy. On the surface, the debate surrounding *Blasted* appears to be a logical reaction to an explicit work of art. However, at the time that *Blasted* debuted, the British stage was dominated with plays featuring graphic violence and sexual content. One must ask the question: why it is that this play, over all others, caused such a controversy?

Today's western society is inundated with violent imagery. Every single day one encounters countless images of horror; some represent actual realized violence while others are simulated and designed to entertain and titillate. As Jeffrey Goldstein points out, while many psychologists and social policy makers argue the effects and impacts of these images on the psycho-social development of children and the long-term effects that the visual exposure to violent imagery has on socio-cultural institutions and interactions, they rarely question why it is that we watch this kind of material (2-3). While there are surely socio-cultural implications to this overwhelming exposure to violent imagery, the

receptive attraction and reaction to violent forms of entertainment are equally intriguing and dynamic components of this socio-cultural phenomenon.

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is unapologetically violent and presents immense staging challenges due to both its violent content and its form. Kane's dramaturgical choices in the composition of the play text are exceptionally innovative and cleverly anticipate and manipulate the audience's horizon of expectations. When *Blasted* premiered in 1995, this manipulation provoked an extreme reaction from the press, both during the production and after the fact. The moral outrage that critics and public media outlets expressed at the form and content of *Blasted* stands in stark contrast to the uncontested exposure to violence that both citizens and critics experienced, and still experience, every day through print media, television and audio-visual entertainment. This hue and cry that surrounded the initial production of *Blasted* condemned the staging of violence as gratuitous and devoid of artistic merit. In response to the press condemnation of her play, Kane asserted that "[t]he thing that shocks me most is that the media seems to have been more upset by the representation of violence than by the violence itself" (Kane qtd in Sierz *In-yer-face* 97). In this comment, Kane identified the fundamental question regarding the media outrage: why is it that a certain representation of violence carries greater weight and power than actual violence in and of itself? This query is an accurate description of the shift in the western social perception and location of violence. In developed nations such as England, beginning in the late 1980s, the privileged middle and upper classes have had relatively minimal personal interactions with physical violence. Rather, their perception and experience of violence occurs at a distance from their individual lives and is experienced through representation in the media. The

reception of *Blasted*, in particular the objections raised over the representation of violence, is inextricably linked to the socio-political-cultural atmosphere of 1990s in Britain.

The In-yer face theatre which emerged during the 1990s has since gained status equitable with the Angry Young Men of the 1950s, the Second Wave of the 1960s and the political theatre of the 1970s -1980s. Taking a similar attitude to its precursors, the In-yer-face aesthetic examines contemporaneous issues in an aggressive, confrontational manner. Sarah Kane is heralded by theatre scholars and practitioners as a seminal figure of the In-yer-face aesthetic. Her work echoes the tones of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) or Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965) or Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) with its unflinching examination and exploration of the human condition. As in the case of her predecessors, Kane's work agitated against the status quo in British Theatre and reinvigorated the public's interest in theatre.

Between 1995 and 1999 Sarah Kane wrote five plays and one short film which came to epitomize the In-yer-face genre and left a distinct impression on both the local British and global theatre communities. Following the dramatic debut of *Blasted* in 1995, Kane wrote and directed *Phaedra's Love* for the Bush Theatre (London) in 1996. This play mimiced the violent content and adroitly structured dialogue that Kane employed in *Blasted*. While it generated a minor sensation, the reception paled in comparison to the intensity of Kane's debut work. Kane returned to the Royal Court in 1998 with *Cleansed*, a play that explores the concepts of love, torture and imprisonment. The same year saw the opening of Kane's fourth play, *Crave,* at the Traverse Theatre in Scotland. With *Crave,* Kane's dramaturgical structure underwent a radical transformation. Written

for four characters identified simply as A, B, C and M, *Crave* is a poetic odyssey of love, violence and relationships. In her final play, *4:48 Psychosis* produced posthumously by the Royal Court Theatre in 2000, Kane completely abandoned traditional dramatic structure and wrote a poetic theatrical piece exploring the multi-faceted dimensions of mental illness. Kane's unwavering examination of the painful and violent facets of human interaction occupies a prominent position in the British theatrical canon. Due to her innovative dramaturgy and the sophistication of her writing, critic Aleks Sierz and theatre scholar Graham Saunders identify Kane as one of the most influential British playwrights in the twentieth century, and *Blasted* as the definitive play of the 1990s.

Given Kane's now elevated status within the theatrical community, the task of retrospectively assessing and interpreting the reception material from *Blasted* poses several challenges. Some of these obstacles include a lack of available archival resources and the creeping nostalgia which has overwhelmed theatre critics and historians since Kane's death in 1999. Given the critical accolades that *Blasted* received after Kane's death, most critics tend to describe the initial production in effusive terms while omitting problematic details. In order to analyze the reception of *Blasted* by the critics, spectators, scholars and the media, a combination of theoretical principles and methodologies need to be employed. The foundation of my analysis follows the theoretical principle established by Mikhail Zagorski, who challenged Meyerhold's behaviouristic study and asserted that, "Who reacts when, how and upon what[; this] is what we want to know when we speak of audience research today" (qtd in Sauter 116). Thus, I will be analyzing when, how and to what the critics reacted.

For the purposes of this study, I will be using Patrice Pavis' definition of the performance text. Pavis defines the performance text as "the mise-en-scène considered not as an empirical object, but as an abstract system, an organized ensemble of signs" (9). As Pavis suggests, the term performance text encapsulates the dynamic composition and interplay of the performance, script and audience. In order to undertake an analysis and evaluation of the reception material, I have attempted to reconstruct the performance text as completely as possible by drawing on archival photographs (provided by the theatre companies and found in articles by Sellar, Urban and Saunders), descriptions of the mise en scène used in critical articles and press reviews from both major and minor British newspapers as well as basic descriptions provided by members of the artistic production teams of the two productions. Reconstructing the 1995 performance text is extremely challenging due to the scarcity of archival documentation and resistance from members of the original production team to requests for interviews. Production Manager of the 1995 production, Paul Handley, was willing to provide basic details of the staging but was not able to provide a detailed description of the production values. Also, as the original production of *Blasted* was extremely low budget and featured rather crude production values, the Royal Court Theatre has released relatively few comments on the execution of the mise en scène. Conversely, given the ongoing assistance from director Jennifer Sealey, my reconstruction of the performance text for the Graeae Theatre Company's 2006/07 production is quite comprehensive. Close study of the performance texts is crucial, not only to assess how the directors interpreted Kane's script, but also so as to establish a reliable reconstruction of a production.

The theoretical frame for this thesis is multifaceted and draws on a combination of both performance and literary reception theory used in conjunction with socio-cultural theories. My first chapter situates *Blasted* within its socio-cultural-historical context and explores key theoretical audience reception concepts developed by Susan Bennett and Hans Robert Jauss. Elaine Aston, George Savona and Anne Ubersfeld's theoretical tenets of theatre semiotics will be used to evaluate the innovative form of *Blasted* and will serve as a basis for my hypothesis as to the audience's socio-semiotic reading of the performance texts. Also, for the purpose of evaluating the reception of various productions, I will outline a viable reconstruction of the critics' horizons of expectations as they emerge from their reviews in the print media. Influential factors include the manner in which the media reports violence, the socio-political relevance of the performing arts, and the socio-political climate in Britain from the late 1980s through to the mid-1990s. In addition to these broader elements, I will also situate the creative climate of the performing and visual arts from the late 1980's through to the early years of the twenty-first century and examine the dominant aesthetic that can be traced across these media. These reception theories will be contextualized and utilized within the specific socio-cultural theory of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Jean Baudrillard's concept of the Simulacrum in *Simulacra and Simulation*.

The theoretical principles explored in the first chapter will serve as a foundation for the receptive analysis in the following two chapters. The second chapter explores the initial production of *Blasted* in 1995 and the third chapter delves into the reception of an unusual subsequent production by the Graeae Theatre Company which cast actors with physical disabilities. Both chapters offer a semiotic and phenomenological analysis of

the press reception and examine the specific mechanics of provocation at work in both the script and the performance text. Specifically, I will trace how the reception of *Blasted* changed between 1995 and the Graeae Theatre Company's 2006/07 production.

The field of audience reception in contemporary theatre is a relatively new area of study and my research will add to the contributions made by Susan Bennett, Patrice Pavis and Gay McAuley, helping to further expand and develop this burgeoning field. As Kane's work has been reinterpreted over the past thirteen years and a rich body of commentary has emerged, very little substantive study has been made of the specific structures and strategies used in her writing and how they influence the audience's reception. The critical tendency in studying Kane's work has been to view her plays as simply a component of the "In-yer face" movement. Moreover, following Kane's suicide in 1999 several critics and theorists have studied her work in terms of her mental illness. However, it is essential to study her plays independently, as they contain unique structures that act directly on the audience. My research seeks to resist the institutional co-option of Kane's work and rejects a biographical reading of her plays.

Sarah Kane's work has important repercussions in a society where people have become desensitized to the violence around them. Her work challenges us to confront our preconceived notions of violence and re-examine our role in the perpetuation of this violence. By examining the specific ways in which her plays confront and break down our established ideas and then relating this to the actual audience reception of her work, I will show how her work is structured to shock audiences out of their reverie and confront them with the lived reality of violence that occurs in the world around them. As we live in a global society that seeks to neutralize the avant garde by assimilating it, it is

essential to understand techniques which are used to subvert our expectations of art with the purpose to shake them from their complacency.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Socio-Cultural-Historical Context

As Aleks Sierz queries in his introduction to *In-yer-face Theatre*, "don't the audiences' reactions tell us more about ourselves than the performance?" (9). The reception of a given work reveals a wealth of socio-cultural values that in turn exposes the complexity of theatrical receptive processes. In her influential work *Theatre Audiences,* Susan Bennett identifies the peril of utilizing a single reception theory in isolation since the theatrical experience incorporates so many socio-cultural factors. To use only one reception theory is to ignore the complexity of the theatrical receptive process which, apart from the performative construct itself, incorporates spectatorship, readership and experiential elements within a given performance. Instead, Bennett presents a multi-faceted theoretical model for approaching reception study which incorporates and re-interprets literary reader-reception principles that are applicable to deciphering stage productions, semiotics and post-structuralist theory. In studying the reception material of the initial production of *Blasted* (1995) and the Graeae Theatre Company's subsequent production in 2006/07, I will be employing her model which consists of two frames:

> The outer frame is concerned with theatre as a cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event, the selection of material for production and the audience's definitions and expectations of a performance. The inner frame contains the event itself and in particular, the spectator's experience of a fictional stage world. This frame encompasses production strategies, ideological overcoding, and the material conditions of

> performance. It is the intersection of these two frames which forms the spectator's cultural understanding and experiences of theatre. (1-2)

Bennett's frames presuppose a number of theoretical principles which are not immediately self evident. As Bennett emphasizes the experiential element of the spectator's reception she implicitly recognizes the phenomenological significance of reception. Building on the theories of literary reception theorist Wolfgang Iser, Bennett suggests the audience member is an active maker of meaning, which is one of the fundamental principles of a spectator-based reception theory. This experiential element features prominently in Aleks Sierz's seminal volume *In-yer-face Theatre* and surfaces repeatedly in the reception material of *Blasted.*

In the case of Sarah Kane's *Blasted,* there are very few sources documenting the reactions of the general public and they appear only as brief entries in some of the reviews or in the context of Graham Saunders' or Aleks Sierz's larger works on the topic. In contrast, there exists a wealth of critical reception material from the print media. As Fernando de Toro posits,

> To date the most extensive and efficient means of accounting for concretization lies with the critics – critics being understood in both the broad and restricted senses of the word – that is to say, in journalistic comments (magazines, newspapers, documents, radio, television) and in literary science. (101)

There is an extraordinary body of data to be found regarding the critical reaction to *Blasted* through a survey of theatre reviews and news articles. The critical implications of the media response are significant insofar as they are collectively perceived to

represent the dominant social ideology of English culture. Thus the response of the critics can be read as exemplifying the response of the public. In particular, the correlation between the sources of outrage for critics writing for *The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* are remarkable. This is not, however, to imply that the critics and reporters who wrote about *Blasted* are a homogeneous group. Instead, given their positions within the media, certain commonalities may be established. These common elements in turn provide a strong foundation upon which to draw conclusions regarding the general reception of the production.

Delving further into Bennett's development of her framework, we see that she employs different literary reader-response theories including the work of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. Jauss's work is particularly integral to Bennett's framework as he pioneered critical approaches to the aesthetics of reception in literature, and these concepts have since been employed in the analysis of performance reception not only by Bennett, but also by de Toro. Jauss proposes that in order to understand the reception of a given work it is necessary to locate it within its historic timeframe. In his second thesis in *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception*, Jauss states,

> [t]he analysis of the literary experience of the reader avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology if it describes the reception and the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations [*the term horizon of expectations will be used to refer to this theoretical component*] that arises for each work in the historical moments of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works. (22)

He argues that artistic character (the perceived merit or quality of the work) may be determined by evaluating the distance between the reader's horizon of expectations and the composition of the new work; or, in other words, how easily the reader understands the work and how closely related it is to the reader's prior experience and social context.

As Jauss postulates, the reader's horizon of expectations is composed of his/her personal lived experiences within the social world in conjunction with their previous experiences of other literary works, and their connection to the contemporary work of art (8-9). Furthermore, Jauss emphasizes that the given work of art has a synchronic and diachronic reception which is interrelated to other works of art and socio-cultural-political factors (32). The synchronic reception refers to the reception of the work at the specific time it was created while the diachronic reception examines how the work is received across time. In the case of *Blasted* there is a radical change from the synchronic reception to the diachronic reception. In the absence of a socio-biographic record of all spectators attending a given performance, it is challenging to establish an accurate proto-horizon of expectations. Therefore, as mentioned when looking at de Toro's argument, I will focus on the reception which *Blasted* received by theatre critics.

Jauss describes how the reception of a given work is indivisible from the socio-political environment within which it is staged; in other words, the reception must be situated within the individual's or group of individuals' horizon of expectations. This is an especially invaluable component to the receptive analysis of this thesis as on the surface, the violent content of *Blasted* appears to be aligned with other contemporary works. I posit that the reception of *Blasted* in 1995 which provoked several critics occurred precisely because of the socio-historical-political context in which it debuted.

In the following years the institutional co-option of the play in the following years is largely due to similar factors. Therefore, we must develop a probable horizon of expectations for the theatre critics who responded so negatively to *Blasted*.

In the analysis of the reception material for the 1995 production of *Blasted*, the horizons of expectations for the critics can be seen as a more or less cohesive system located within the social, political and artistic climate that began developing in the 1980s. One element that strongly influenced the reception of *Blasted* was the conservative social policy instituted by Margaret Thatcher during her term as Prime Minister from 1979-1990. Following these oppressive, economically strained years of Thatcherism, there was initial anticipation that John Major's election in 1990 would herald a time of cultural revitalization. However, Thatcher's policies have left a lasting legacy within the cultural sector of British society, perhaps forever changing cultural policies, funding and infrastructure. In his examination of the correlation between funding policies and creative activity in Britain, Aleks Sierz writes that:

> Neither the bi-polar division – created in the 1950's between commercial and subsidized sectors, nor the tripartite division – so characteristic of the 1970's – between public, commercial and fringe theatre have survived the political, economic and social changes of the 1980s. Both these mythical structures were dispatched by Thatcherism, which imposed the profit motive on almost all sectors of public life. ("Art flourishes" 37)

While Sierz continues on to argue that creative output is not directly correlated to funding policy, he does stress that the social perception of theatre specifically, as well as

the arts in general, underwent a fundamental shift under Thatcher's rule towards equating artistic value with commercial success.

Thatcher's policies directly contravened the founding principles of the Arts Council, an organization established by the government in 1945. Bryan Appleyard describes the early years of Thatcher's reign as a time when "[t]he arts were like health or good housing in that they represented a socially desirable service which was of absolute value in itself and of relative value as a means of improving national unity and self esteem" (305). As Appleyard suggests, following the Tory victory of 1979, the arts suffered a fate similar to the other socialist-structured cultural institutions in Britain, which the Tories seemed determined to dismantle. While Thatcher did not cut funding outright, during her rule the Arts Council was characterized by stagnant funding which, in the face of double-digit inflation, led to a quick decrease in monies available (Appleyard 307). Theatres were directed to seek private subsidy. In his survey of theatre at this time, Keith Peacock writes that "During the years of the Thatcher government's consolidation of its state power, 1985-1986, many theatres reached a financial nadir. The Royal Court was only saved from cutting its program by a $50,000 Challenge Fund offered by the American Director, Joseph Papp" (Peacock 49). Indeed, due to the Royal Court Theatre's mandate, which prioritizes creativity and innovation over commercial success, it almost went under during the years of Thatcher's reign. Throughout the 1980s, Thatcher and her Arts Minister Norman St. John Stevas sought to shift the arts system to a market economy structure. Only three months following Thatcher's election, St. John Stevas was quoted in *The Observer* as saying:

> The arts world [...] must come to terms with the fact that Government policy in general has decisively tilted away from the expansion of the public to the private sector. The Government fully intends to honour its pledge to maintain support for the arts as a major feature of policy, but we look to the private sector to meet any shortfall and to provide immediate means of increase. (qtd in Peacock 36)

This policy shift instituted an economically free market approach to theatre and greatly influenced the public perception of the arts. Most notably, it altered the criteria used to evaluate the success of productions. In particular, as Sierz stresses, creative success became equated with commercial success rather than innovations in form and content ("Art flourishes" 36). By the end of the 1980s the state of theatre was precarious. As the historian Peacock describes,

> [the] Thatcher government's unwillingness to continue to increase funding and its begrudging, but often loudly trumpeted, occasional allocation of additional money late in the financial year, were intended to convey the impression that theatre was not an agency of cultural, spiritual, social or psychological welfare but an entertainment industry that was otherwise irrelevant to the workings of society [...] By restraining funding, the government relocated theatre at a distance from topical concerns to be judged primarily on the basis of its theatrical values rather than on its contributions to the democratic structure and cultural health of British society. (215-216)

This standstill funding had a dramatic effect on theatre in the 1980s as theatre companies became less willing to risk staging new and/or artistically innovative performances due to the overwhelming emphasis on commercial success. In response to Thatcherite policies, the "Theatre in Crisis" conference was held at Goldsmith's College on December 4, 1988. The declaration that emerged from this event was signed by influential and prominent theatre practitioners such as Howard Brenton, John McGrath and Harold Pinter (Peacock 57). These individuals asserted in the declaration that:

> We believe that a free market economy and private sponsorship cannot guarantee the necessary conditions for theatre to fulfill its many functions in the current climate of increasing authoritarianism and regulation, the health of the theatre along with cultural activity of all kinds has been seriously impaired and is under further threat. (Peacock 57)

In spite of efforts like these, the free market economy values of Thatcherite policies became embedded in the collective cultural value system. Seven years after Thatcher's reign ended in 1995, the legacy of her government's equation of commercial success with artistic value still featured prominently in the reviews of the debut production of *Blasted*. Indeed, the print media's criticism of the production focuses overtly on its public subsidy and its graphic representation of violence but makes little to no mention of the possible political commentary on, among other possibilities, Britain's position on the war in Yugoslavia. It is of interest to note that in the wake of the outrage surrounding *Blasted*, both Harold Pinter and Howard Brenton (two playwrights who signed the 'Theatre in Crisis' statement) made public statements of support for Kane (Sierz *In-yer-*

face 96). From all these examples, we can see that Thatcher's conservative policies are a central component of the critics' horizons of expectations.

Another element that can be justifiably seen as part of the critics' horizon of expectations is the emergence of a group of young visual artists, later dubbed the YBAs (Young British Artists). First appearing in the late days of Thatcher's reign, these radical new artists sought to reframe violence and sexuality in a fresh and innovative manner. They not only tried to change and challenge the form of visual art but also to promote themselves in a commercial capacity. In 1988 the widely acclaimed *Freeze Exhibition* at the London Docklands, curated by Damien Hirst and featuring artists from London's Goldsmith's College such as Sarah Lucas and Matthew Collingswood, heralded the emerging aesthetic of the group. The artists featured in the *Freeze Exhibition* often used found materials in their works, such as rubbish or cardboard boxes, which took on a controversial and confrontational aesthetic because they appeared to require relatively little artistic skill or financial resources to create.

Some of these outrageous avant-garde artists would go on to receive funding from the state; however, contrary to the funding situation for theatre artists, private subsidy was a primary source of income and funding for artistic pursuits. For instance, works by artists such as Matthew Collingswood and Damien Hirst were purchased by art dealer and gallery owner Charles Saatchi and received great critical acclaim. In fact, it was Saatchi who "played a pivotal role in establishing a group identity for these artists in the early 1990's through a series of exhibitions at his North London gallery entitled *Young British Artists*" (Betterton 287). Saatchi's involvement led to the artists being commercially marketed to the private sector and as such the initial works were acquired

by a very select, affluent group of individuals. In turn, the most seemingly vile and offensive works produced by these artists were received positively due in no small part to the prestige and commercial success of the artists who created them. The success of Saatchi's marketing campaign and the proven success of the visual artists eventually led to publicly funded support. For instance, in 1995, the British Government funded the exhibition *Brilliant! New Art from London* at the Walker Centre in Minneapolis (Collings). This eventual public funding of the YBAs only served to further enhance their commercial success and critical reception which was truly exceptional and unprecedented in recent years in Britain. Indeed, the approval and support of the government appears to have firmly cemented the positive critical reception of many of the YBA's visual art works. Through the analysis of this positive reaction by the critics to the YBAs, it becomes apparent that any critic with basic knowledge of the arts world at the time would have had these violent, radical artists as a part of their horizon of expectations.

In analyzing the work of the YBAs, parallels with plays like *Blasted* become obvious. One good example is the following work of art by Matthew Collingswood, *Bullet Hole* (1988) (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1

This work is described in the Saatchi catalogue as follows:

> Bullet Hole is one large photo, made up of 15 frames, fragmented like the panes of a stained glass window. At first glance, it's unreadable, like an abstract painting. Then an image registers, a gaping vagina. It's only with the full realization that this is a close up of a head wound (taken from a pathology textbook) that the layering becomes complete: there's a religious beauty and animal sexuality in something so abhorrent. (Saatchi Gallery)

The commendation Collingswood received for this work stands in stark contrast to the reaction to *Blasted*. *Bullet Hole* is an extremely graphic image which frames a gaping

head wound as a work of art, much as *Blasted* presents a series of violent acts within the frame of a professional theatrical performance. Due to the highly aestheticized composition and framing of the image used in *Bullet Hole,* combined with its location in a privately funded art gallery, it was perceived as a work of art rather than deemed horrific and offensive. However, *Blasted* was situated in similar conditions, as it was also located at a renowned professional theatre. This suggests that there must have been more at work disturbing the critics than just violence re-framed as art. One aspect wherein *Bullet Hole* and *Blasted* differ is the fact that the highly structured form of the photograph allows the viewer to maintain aesthetic distance from the image whereas in the live performance of *Blasted*'s unique dramaturgy this safeguard is aggressively obliterated. I will investigate this concept of aesthetic distance in my second and third chapters, as well as delve into the socio-cultural-historical factors influencing the critical reception of the debut of *Blasted* in 1995 and the Graeae Theatre Company's production in 2006/07.

The emergence of the YBAs in the visual arts community coincided with the arrival of the theatrical genre in which *Blasted* belongs. The genre was coined In-yer-face theatre by critic Aleks Sierz, and his work in the field is an invaluable source as he not only studied and viewed virtually all of the British In-yer-face productions but conducted extensive interviews with the writers, directors, critics and producers throughout the 1990s. His work suggests that this new genre shares a similar tone with the YBAs:

> [In-yer-face Theatre t]akes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both

> actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics or is shocking because it is new in tone and structure, or it is bolder and more experimental than what audiences are used to. (*In-yer-face* 4)

The YBA and the In-yer-face aesthetic movements created works which reframed violent and sexual imagery in a jarring manner. The staging of violent, sexual content in and of itself is not innovative; this type of content has been present on British stages in various manifestations through the works of playwrights such as Edward Bond, Howard Brenton and John McGrath from the 1960s through to the 1990s. However, one of the most distinguishing dramaturgical features of In-yer-face playwriting is the radical re-interpretation and adaptation of traditional dramatic forms to subvert audience expectations. This subversive reframing challenges the notions of traditional representational theatrical models and manipulates aesthetic distance. Similar to the YBAs, the aesthetics of the In-yer-face playwrights often question the very notion of art itself by presenting and representing the abject and profane in a visceral, gritty frame; as a result, visual art and theatre critics, as well as audiences, frequently doubted the artistic merit of works produced by these groups.

As with the YBAs, the In-yer-face plays tend to explore and examine socially taboo topics such as violence, sex, sexuality and recreational drug use in an innovative and aggressive manner, and this characteristic came to define the genre. As several theatre critics, such as Michael Billington and Charles Spencer, have remarked, there are simply no topics that are off limits to In-yer-face playwrights, and so Sierz used this element in his development of the genre's name. Sierz traces the etymology of the term

as follows: "The phrase 'in-your-face' is defined by the *New Oxford Dictionary* (1998) as something 'blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid'. The Collins English Dictionary (1998) adds the adjective 'confrontational'" ("In-yer-face: Ravenhill" 109). Furthermore, Sierz emphasizes that the term (which originated to describe American Sports Journalism) "implies being forced to see something close up, and gives a sense of that violation of intimacy that some forms of extreme drama produce in the audience. It also suggests the crossing of normal boundaries" ("In-yer-face: Ravenhill" 109). Sierz stresses the importance of naming the aesthetic In-yer-face Theatre, as opposed to other suggestions such as New Brutalism or Blood and Sperm Generation, because the name evokes several of the important components of the genre including "a break with the past, the relationship between the play and the audience, and the Zeitgeist of the 1990s" ("In-yer-face: Ravenhill" 109).

This list of definitive In-yer-face characteristics reiterates the strong ties that this theatre aesthetic has to the historical moment in which it emerged. The development of the genre was driven in part by the newfound importance placed on new play development during John Major's reign in government; without this influence, there would not have been the support necessary to encourage the production of so many new works. As Sierz identifies,

> At the end of the 1980s, Arts Council Statistics showed that new plays formed less than ten per cent of the repertoire. By 1994-1996, New Writing made up 20 per cent of staged work in subsidized theatres. What this means is that more new plays were put on than productions of Shakespeare and the Classics. ("In-yer-face: Ravenhill" 107)

This explosion of new play development was primarily driven by the playwrights who came to be associated with the In-yer-face movement. Although the term In-yer-face rose to prominence following the staging of *Blasted* in 1995, several plays had already been produced which would later be defined as In-yer-face Theatre. However, although they were criticized, none elicited such a strong response in the press or within the artistic community as *Blasted*. For example, Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator* premiered at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh, Scotland) on August 12, 1993. The play centres around three twenty-something friends: Alan, Max and Tadge (a recently discharged soldier). It graphically explores the boundaries between reality and violent pornographic fantasy and contains a series of increasingly violent acts, including sodomy. Neilson uses a colloquial register of language and the text is dominated by expletives offering painful insights into the existences of the characters. While some reviewers criticized the play, it did not cause a substantial amount of outrage. It is really only retrospectively that Neilson's play has gained critical acclaim and since been produced countless times. Similarly, Phyllis Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* was produced at the Almeida Theatre on April 7, 1994. While containing explicit material regarding matricide and sexuality, it did not inspire a notably provoked response in the press. The reception of these two plays, however, offers a valuable counterpoint to the reception of *Blasted* as they share a similar aesthetic, exploring violence in a graphic and explicit manner, yet prompted very different reactions from members of the press. They demonstrate that the violence exhibited in *Blasted* was not completely discontinuous with the critics' horizons of expectations as they had seen other explicitly violent plays which were prevalent at the time. Thus, I argue that it was not solely the violent content of *Blasted* which elicited

such a negative response, but rather the content in combination with Kane's innovative form, a theory to be further addressed in the second chapter of this thesis.

The audience's process of negotiating and extracting meaning from a play is complex and multi-faceted, and is inextricably influenced by their horizons of expectations. As Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes theorized, the individual reads signs in order to understand the world. These linguistic, visual and oral signs are specific to a given culture; however, with the emergence of the global village, numerous signs have transcended their local significance. On any given day, an individual will negotiate the world by prioritizing a series of signs in relation to his/her subject position. This process is significantly altered within the realm of performance. Anne Ubersfeld, Elaine Aston and George Savona have devoted considerable study to examining and developing the theory of semiotics in relation to theatre. As Aston and Savona stress, "[e]verything which is presented to the spectator within the theatrical frame is a sign, as the Prague School was first to recognize [...] As such, the process of signification is directed and controlled" (99). In other words, theatre artists are able to manipulate the signs that are presented onstage, and this is what makes theatre unique. Not only does everything have meaning, but its sign systems are dynamic and unfixed. As Aston and Savona highlight, "[s]igns operating within the theatrical frame need to be hierarchised in such a way as to help 'fix' meaning. Like language, theatre can foreground or 'make strange' specific elements of staging as a means to creating difference or significance" (101). Since the directors, designers and playwrights creating theatre hold the power to manipulate signs, audience members tend to view everything that happens onstage as intentional. This perceived intentionality can be manipulated by directors to various

ends. If the director camouflages their intention to provoke the audience, the audience is more likely to experience genuine shock by what is perceived to be unintentionally provocative. Alternately, when a director stages an explicit and graphic work that is perceived as intentionally privileging violent signs designed to shock, the audience tends to be provoked.

In the case of Sarah Kane and other so-called provocative playwrights, the audience's critique focuses on the signs and systems (or the lack thereof) that are given a position of privilege onstage. With the first production of *Blasted*, the audience was confronted with, and potentially affronted by, the staging of images of blatant carnage. The provocative potential of the production was further influenced by the framing of the aforementioned images in terms of their being read as a sign, index or icon. As Ubersfeld posits, employing elements of Pierce's semiotic theory:

> It goes without saying that every theatrical sign is both index and icon, and sometimes symbol: icon because theatre is in a way the production-reproduction of human actions; index because every element of the performance integrates itself within a succession from which it takes its meaning. The most innocent and seemingly gratuitous item tends to be perceived by the spectator as an index of things to come, even if that expectation is never fulfilled. (13)

As her statement underscores, the spectator anticipates that the signs presented onstage are an iconic representation of everyday life and also serve as indexes of meaning for the entirety of the work. For the purposes of this thesis, the concept of indices and symbolic signs is of the greatest interest since the subject refiguring of symbolic language and

images was at the heart of the initial media fury and continues to resurface in reception material generated from subsequent productions. It appears that the spectators' reaction to the violent images represented onstage short-circuited their potential figurative meaning. More specifically, director James Macdonald's opening mise en scène appeared to present relatively benign iconic signs – hotel room, bed, flowers etc. – which were transformed through the action onstage to index vastly different, violent meanings. Scholar Helen Iball's "phenomenologically vandalistic" interpretation of this component of the dramatic text will be analysed with reference to the performance text in the second and third chapters. I hypothesize that it was the explicitness of the representation of violence in the 1995 production that resulted in a reductive reading, whereas in the Graeae Theatre Company's 2006/07 production, the more abstract staging prompted a more symbolic reconfiguration of the violent imagery.

In her work, Anne Ubersfeld offers an extensive framework for analyzing theatrical performances. She writes, "It is clear that the principal difficulty in analyzing the sign in theatre lies in its *polysemy*. This polysemy is of course the result of the fact that one and the same sign is present in sets belonging to different codes, although they come together on the stage" (16). As Ubersfeld suggests, the semiotic reading/interpretation of theatre is multifaceted due to the multiplicity of signs and sign systems which work in conjunction with one another onstage in a manner that rarely appears in everyday life. In *Blasted,* the onstage marriage of conventional theatrical codes with the destructive codes of imminent violence and chaos illustrates the polysemic functions at work. In the critical reception material generated in response to *Blasted* in 1995, it is this combination of signs and codes which seemed to disturb the

theatre critics the most. Their reaction to the polysemy at work in the 1995 production will be assessed in detail in the second chapter. The third chapter will then explore a radical reinterpretation of the script which includes a complex, polysemic mise en scène.

In conjunction with the aforementioned socio-historical factors, the critical reception of *Blasted* is further complicated by contemporary mediatized theories of how sign systems function within society and culture. The second part of the twentieth century was a time of unparalleled technological innovation and mass consumption in the West. Under the auspice of Margaret Thatcher, English society and culture moved more aggressively towards a more fully-realized free market economy which accelerated mass consumerism. Guy Debord, the French theorist who pioneered the concept of *The Society of the Spectacle*, wrote in 1967 that "[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (5). Within the Society of the Spectacle, individuals have become profoundly alienated from reality and/or material objects. Indeed, as Debord suggests in his manifesto, the lived praxis of human existence has become subordinate to the circulation of spectacles/signs. Situated within this socio-cultural perspective, the negative reception of *Blasted* in 1995 is rendered even more illuminating because it created a sign system which called attention to its own construction and conventions.

The institutional co-option of the YBAs and the In-yer-face playwrights in the latter half of the 1990s, as described earlier in this chapter, illustrates the omnipresence of the Society of the Spectacle. In the 1980s and onwards Jean Baudrillard identified this social phenomenom as the age of Simulation. Baudrillard advanced some of Debord's

concepts in his work *Simulations* to encompass the changing structures of mass media and the realm of the virtual. Baudrillard posits that,

> the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrections in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and combinatory algebra. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. (*Simulacra* 204)

With the dissolution of the real into sign systems, signs (in art as well as in everyday life) have become the highest and sole form of social navigation and the source for the greatest cultural currencies. Thus, the images which promote and call immediate attention to their referents are increasingly rare and jarring to the spectator. This can be seen as a reinvigoration of the avant-garde's notion of shock and awe as a way to activate their spectators.

During an interview discussing her work in 1997 Kane made a pointed observation: "[t]he week [*Blasted*] opened there was an earthquake in Japan in which thousands of people died, and in this country a fifteen-year-old girl was raped and murdered in a wood, but *Blasted* got more media coverage in some newspapers than either of these events" (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 130). As Kane's statement illustrates, the representation of violence onstage becomes imbued with greater social currency (more media coverage) and power than the representation of authentic violent events. It is this implicit trust of reliable, truthful prioritization that the public has in the

representational power of the media that Kane critiques in *Blasted* when she depicts images of violence and destruction in a chaotic manner.

In reviewing the reception material for *Blasted,* it can be interpreted that the outcry greeting the initial production in 1995 was in part due to the dramaturgical framing of violent imagery. This view is supported by the fact that it was the latter half of *Blasted*, which is set in a war zone, that provoked critics the most. A brief overview of the nature of war reporting and media coverage in the United Kingdom offers some key insights into the receptive conditioning of spectators to mediatized violent images. The social mechanisms at work that perpetuate the Simulacrum become readily apparent when reviewing pertinent war coverage in Britain and thus this kind of study provides valuable material for reconstructing the critics' horizons of expectations.

Since the Falklands War in 1982, the role of the media in reporting war in British culture has been the target of both controversy and criticism. During the war between the Brits and Argentinians to gain control of the Falkland Islands, the government completely controlled the information that was released to media sources and actively encouraged heavily patriotic interpretations of the news. They achieved this first by sending only British correspondents to the war zone, rather than any foreign journalists, thus ensuring a lack of objectivity and a resulting patriotism (Jones 344), and second by blocking media access to satellites so that journalists were forced to ship coverage home by sea. Because of the resulting clean, almost-bloodless version of the war that was initially reported, the British public and the media were supportive of and enthusiastic about the war (Valentine). It was only after gory images and live footage were finally broadcast some seventeen days later that the British public actually realized the true

situation in the Falklands and the extent of British casualties. There was an ensuing uproar in the print media of Britain regarding the role that various papers had played in forwarding Thatcher's propaganda agenda (Jones). However, this initial insistence on objective war reporting was relatively short-lived in the British psyche, as evidenced in their reaction to reporting on the Persian Gulf War (1990-991).

In surveying the dominant representational modes for depictions of war in the media, patterns emerge that are complex and at times contradictory. As opposed to the structured photographic images of violence that featured in works of art in the 1990s, mainstream televised media primarily represented images of authentic violence in a manner that clearly differentiates between right and wrong, upholding the binary of good and evil. Jeffrey Goldstein asserts that this construction is also echoed in violent entertainment (video games, films, etc.) which "seems to be attractive when it contains an engaging fantasy theme in which the disliked characters are defeated by liked characters in the cause of justice" (4). This moral binary rests upon the careful construction of specific images and information that are being relayed to the viewers. In discussing press controls and manipulation in war reporting, Olivia Boyd-Barrett states that, "(w)ar reporting is generally one sided. The media typically covers war from the point of view of that country's government and its foreign policy elites" ("Reporting War" 29). It seems a reasonable assumption that twentieth-century cynicism would call into question the validity of the 'truths' reported; however, the opposite is true. Viewers expect film and television representations of war in which the image reinforces the fact that the home nation is the upholder of the moral good. This expectation is so embedded within dominant social discourse that, during the Persian Gulf War in Iraq, Londoners

protested the coverage by the 24hour British News network. The network presented a series of reports that attempted to take no moral stance, thus leaving the viewer to develop his/her own interpretation and morally situate her/himself. However, this relative objectivity and lack of moral commentary seemed to be the source of the outraged response from the public. The criticism "centered on their [the network's] widely perceived tendency to present images without adequate context or explanation (effectively making them purveyors of "war porn" in the judgment of some)" (Alan and Zelizer 10). The type of news reporting which the public demanded from the media a decade earlier, in the wake of the Falklands War, had been thrown by the wayside; this protest against the 24hour British News network demonstrated that the public had no real desire to interpret a series of uncontextualized images and preferred subjective reporting which reinforced the national position.

This intrinsic link between patriotism and war reporting in Britain is painfully illustrated by the minimal amount of coverage that the Bosnian Serbian conflict received on British television. An international case study examined the international coverage of the Bosnian war in television news bulletins between May 16 and 21, 1994 (while there was a threat of UN withdrawal) identifies that, "There were 2-minute items on BBCI; one 2-minute report on ITV; and one 18-second report on Channel Four" (Preston 171). The research team involved uses the study to illustrate that news coverage is an inconsistent witness to world events (Preston 174). The findings of this study further reinforce the misguided trust that British society places in the mass media to provide accurate representations of reality. As Tim Allen writes of the 1990s in his article "War, Ethnicity, Media: Perceiving Contemporary Wars":

> In the West, the era of investigative TV journalism seems to be coming to an end, particularly when it relates to parts of the world thought to be far away. Rapid-fire, bullet point summaries of events, combined with images that are heart-rending but sanitized, 'real-time' but manipulated have become the dominant model [...]usually, no attempt is made to explain events in more than the shallowest of terms. The objective is often to elicit sympathy for the apparently innocent and helpless, or sometimes to rail against the manifest horrors of the world. But it is rarely to attempt a deeper understanding. (38)

This mediatized barrage of violent images on the news designed to elicit sympathy or horror has become a dominant mode of representing war and violence. It is interesting to note that, as Kane aptly pointed out in an interview, "While the corpse of Yugoslavia was rotting on our doorstep, the press chose to get angry, not about the corpse, but about the cultural event that drew attention to it" (Kane qtd in Stephenson and Langridge 131). Kane's comment offers a pointed insight into the potential reception of her work. In the 1995 production the press took objection with the representation of atrocities which possibly could occur in a war while there was relatively little commentary published in major British newspapers on the actual brutal war which was occurring in Yugoslavia. The content of the play can potentially be read as an illustration of the Yugoslavian conflict but is equally applicable to numerous other armed conflicts which have occurred. The dramatic text of *Blasted* operates in opposition to the dominant media depictions as it does not offer any easy moral positions for the audience to assume and

collapses the social structures which the British believe in, but which actually get destroyed during a time of war.

Over the course of the past century artists have sought to create works that interrogate and challenge dominant socio-cultural perceptions of the Western world. This goal has spawned a wide range of dramaturgical and performance techniques. Bertolt Brecht's famous concept of Verfremdung is a clear illustration of a theatre practitioner's strategic attempt to distance/alienate the audience from a performance in order to provoke critical thought. Brecht's theories and strategies echo the theory of ostranenie developed by Victor Shklovsky in regards to artistic figuration. Shklovsky defines the concept of estrangement, or ostranenie, as:

> Art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The aim of art is to offer the perceptibility of things, as they are perceived, not as they are known. The device of art is to make things strange (ostranenie), to make forms difficult (zatrudnën-naya forma), increasing the complexity and the length of reception, for the process of reception in art is self-sufficient and needs to be prolonged; art is the device of bringing an object to life, while the object itself is not important. (qtd in Jestrovic 18)

Shklovsky's emphasis on the perception and reception of the work has made this theory invaluable to the theatre, and this concept is perpetually revisited in varying forms by different avant garde artists. In her study on the Theatre of Estrangement, Silvija Jestrovic offers a comprehensive overview of Shklovsky's ostranenie and Brecht's

interpretation of it and argues that it is not solely a theoretical concept but rather a practical artistic strategy. Jestrovic suggests that,

> Shklovsky's work outlined the notion of defamiliarization, not as a mere by-product of aesthetic representation, but as the core of art and its reception. Ostranenie is established through form – conscious devices by taking material out of its habitual context and organizing it into an aesthetic object. Ostranenie is a device of separating art and life that enables the perception of the well known as if seen for the first time. (18-19)

Jestrovic's emphasis on perception and reception is especially useful in examining the reception material from *Blasted*. For instance, in the composition of the text of *Blasted* as well as the performance text, there is evidence of Shklovsky's concept of ostranenie. We can examine how Kane structures the dramatic text and in turn how director James Macdonald interprets it for the stage to reframe violence, thus invoking a new perception within the audience.

I argue that Kane employs this strategy of ostranenie in her work to manipulate the anticipated reception of her audience in order to elicit a provoked response. In 1969 Martin Esslin addressed this very issue when he interpreted the staging of violence as such: "We are faced with an age of mass media allowing the manipulation of human responses. Art, I think, being man's attempt to increase awareness of his own situation, has therefore the duty to shock people out of this" (Esslin 177). Esslin's use of the word 'shock', while an apt description of the theatrical aesthetic at the time he was writing

(1960s), seems oddly prophetic of the In-yer-face aesthetic which existed in Britain in the 1990s.

The dramaturgical framework Kane establishes in her creation of the text is unique and poses a formidable challenge for the audience to navigate. Piet Defraeye writes,

> Sarah Kane's dramaturgy (too) brings about an inherent and thus strategic spectatorial resistance. The violent imagery in her work is mostly aimed at subverting a complacent consuetudinary – and therefore complicit – disposition towards violence and violent imagery mostly cultivated by television and cinema. The apparent lack of narrative structure combines to the elicitation of resistance: rather like standing in the middle of a busy intersection trying to negotiate hectic traffic coming in all directions. ("In-yer-face" 89)

In his brief assessment of Kane's dramaturgy, Defraeye addresses the key reception issue which *Blasted* seeks to disrupt: in a society where people are divorced from the reality of violence in their lives and are living in a world where reality is manufactured, exactly how is theatre able to disturb and/or provoke the audience? As Defraeye suggests, Kane's dramaturgy strategically manipulates the live medium and perceived fakeness of theatre in order to elicit a violent reception to the violence onstage. While audience members have often been exposed to countless horrific images in digital and print media, and while these images are perceived to represent real events, due to the aestheticization and framing of the images they are read as closed and therefore the individual is able to distance him/herself from the image. Moreover, typically in theatrical representations of

violence, a distance is established between the action onstage and the audience through the frame of dramatic fiction and dramatic technique which fosters a sense of distance and safety for the spectator. Conversely, a series of fictitious, atrocious, horrific images, such as those represented in *Blasted*, are more likely to disturb the spectator because they are framed in an unfamiliar manner which does not correspond to other signs, representations or images of violence which were in social circulation. This innovative and aggressive dramaturgical approach to disrupting the spectator's reading of the performance was discontinuous with the critic's horizon of expectations and in turn instigated an onslaught of critical and moral outrage.

I contend that *Blasted* was the source of so much indignation and controversy because of the dramaturgical strategies which Kane embeds in the text and James Macdonald emphasized in his mise en scène which, in turn, resulted in the audience members perceiving familiar images and ideas in an unfamiliar manner.

In reflecting on the horizon of expectations and the radical innovations in form and content which were prevalent throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is somewhat surprising that *Blasted* evoked the strong response that it did. Upon a cursory examination one has substantial grounds to question why it was that *Blasted* in particular elicited such a moralistically outraged response at a time when numerous other In-yer-face plays were also in production on London stages, not to mention the visual art being produced by the YBAs. What was it about this play in particular which pushed the buttons of the critics? What drove Jack Tinker to rush out and file his scathing review as a news story immediately following the show? How and why was *Blasted* dubbed as a masterpiece of the offensive and obscene?

Chapter 2: Audience Reception of the Initial Production of *Blasted* 1995

In *Arguments for a Theatre*, Howard Barker posits that, "an [honoured] audience will quarrel with what it has seen, it will go home in a state of anger, not because it disapproves, but because it has been taken where it was reluctant to go. Thus morality is created in art, by exposure to pain and the illegitimate thought" (46). Barker's comment is echoed in various forms throughout the reviews that were generated in response to the debut production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. This production was seen by only approximately 1100 people (Sierz *In-yer-face 105*) making it, as Aleks Sierz asserts, "one of the most talked about but least seen British plays of the nineties" (*In-yer-face* 105). The reviews of the production feature vivid lists of the graphically violent content of the play, and therefore offer a valuable point of departure for examining the underlying socio-cultural factors that influenced this provoked reception. Through a close reading of James Macdonald's mise en scène of the original 1995 production of *Blasted*, this chapter will explore how the dramaturgical structure of the play undermines the realistic representation that it first creates. I will then theorize the ways in which the dramaturgical "phenomenological vandalism" posited by Helen Iball impacts the spectator through applying Ken Urban's reading of *Blasted* as enacting an ethics of catastrophe. I will argue that it is this destruction of the play's initial theatrical form combined with James Macdonald's crude and realistic mise en scène which provoked the extreme reactions expressed in many of the reviews.

In order to analyze the critics' reactions, it is crucial to first situate their horizon of expectations, and for this, the venue and production company of the premiere are significant. In *Theatre Audiences,* Susan Bennett emphasizes the influence of the

physical theatre space on the reception of a performance, and this was certainly the case with *Blasted*. It premiered in 1995 at the Jerwood Upstairs theatre of the Royal Court Theatre in London. The Jerwood theatre is a small space with a capacity of only sixty seats.[1] In the case of *Blasted*, Sierz writes, "the smallness of the venue intensified the play's impact" (*In-yer-face* 94). The compact nature of the theatre itself is significant as it intensified the physical proximity of the staged violence and heightened spectators' awareness of fellow spectators. The tickets for the play were priced at 10-15£ ($25-35 Canadian) making the play fairly accessible to the general public (Royal Court). However, the initial performances were performed for a constituent audience composed primarily of critics, theatre practitioners and subscription holders. This constituent audience were familiar with the theatre's mandate and their commitment to staging innovative productions.

The debut of *Blasted* was certainly not the first play to incite outrage at the Royal Court Theatre. The theatre has a long-standing history of staging controversial works, from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, Edward Bond's *Saved* in 1965 and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in 1979. Their mandate states:

> The Royal Court is Britain's first national theatre company, and has held firm to its vision of being a writers' theatre. Its plays have challenged the artistic, social and political orthodoxy of the day, pushing back the boundaries of what was possible or acceptable. ("Royal Court")

They have an internationally acclaimed reputation for developing innovative, thought-provoking productions through their writing programs. Stephen Daldry became the

[1] The seating capacity of the theatre differs in several publications on this production (60-105). The Royal Court theatre lists the capacity as sixty.

artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre in 1992 and throughout the early 1990s he staged works by Joe Penhall, Jonathan Harvey, Nick Grosso and Judy Upton that dealt with taboo topics and contained violent and explicit content. In fact, the production of Judy Upton's visceral and violent *Ashes and Sand* in the Upstairs Theatre space in December of 1994 (only a month before *Blasted)* went relatively unnoticed by the press. Given the somewhat notorious reputation of the Royal Court Theatre and the violent and taboo content that figured prominently in the 1994 season, as well as the fact that *Blasted* was presented in the smaller upstairs venue, it seems even more remarkable to observe the outrage and condemnation that critics such as Michael Billington, Charles Spencer and Jack Tinker expressed towards the theatre's artistic director Stephen Daldry for selecting *Blasted* for production. The critics were also outraged and offended by the form and content of the play itself.

Summarizing a Kane play does a great disservice to the many linguistic nuances employed in the dramatic text. However, due to the complexity of Kane's dramaturgy, a summary is required as it lays the necessary groundwork for analyzing the central moments of the text within the larger narrative framework of the play. Kane describes Cate as "21, a lower-middle-class Southerner with a south London accent and a stutter when under stress" and Ian as "45, Welsh born but lived in Leeds much of his life and picked up the accent" (3). The play opens with the two characters entering into a seemingly standard corporate hotel room. In the first two scenes of *Blasted,* Cate and Ian remain in the hotel room. Ian speaks in a derogatory manner about the race of the hotel employees and people that he terms "retards" (5). Ian shows Cate a gun and makes vague references to his occupation as a secret agent. Cate appears to experience some

type of seizure that causes her to lose consciousness. Once awake, Ian attempts to persuade Cate to have sex with him and when she resists, he rapes her. Cate retreats to the bathroom and offers some observations about what she sees outside the window. There is a knock at the door which when Ian opens it reveals the Soldier. Then suddenly, the power shifts in the play as Ian enters into conversation with the Soldier who is holding a sniper rifle. After the Soldier breaks down the bathroom door and announces that Cate has escaped, he begins to desecrate the hotel room and urinates on the bed when a wall explodes, suddenly revaling that the hotel room is in the midst of a war zone. The physical setting in the latter half of the play appears to be as geographically undetermined as in the first half since there are no visual signs to denote a specific location. Throughout the latter half of the play, the Soldier recounts war atrocities which he has both been subjected to and in turn committed himself. The Soldier then rapes Ian at gunpoint. When Ian asks if the Soldier is going to kill him, the Soldier (as outlined in the stage directions) "*puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye*" (50) and then commits suicide. This is followed by the entrance of Cate, who is wet and holding a baby. Ian asks her to find his gun so that he can end his life. Cate locates the gun in the Soldier's hand and removes the bullets and then refuses to give it to Ian, insisting that he cannot give up. After a while Cate realizes that the baby is dead and she buries it beneath the floorboards and marks the grave with a makeshift cross. She exits to find food and makes reference to sexually servicing soldiers in order to obtain it. Left alone, Ian masturbates and defecates. Light effects suggest an indeterminate amount of time passes

until eventually Ian is left hugging the body of the dead Soldier. In the closing scene of the play,

> *Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby's body out. He eats the baby. He puts the remains back in the baby's blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole. A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor. He dies with relief. It starts to rain.* (60)

Cate returns to feed him and give him gin to drink. The play closes with rain falling as Cate sucks her thumb and Ian utters "Thank-You" (61).

Given the violent content of the play and the aggressive nature of its dramaturgical structure *Blasted* seems an apt title for the work. The title functions on multiple levels as it literally describes the experience of Cate, Ian and the Soldier in the hotel room while also implying the symbolic meaning of the impact of war on the individuals that it affects. Additionally, the publicity campaign for *Blasted* featured a young soldier expressing the victory sign with his hand which offers a pointed contrast to the actual content of the work (Royal Court). These publicity materials may also have contributed to provoking the critics as the play was actively marketed in contrary manner to its content.

As previously mentioned, the critics reacted negatively to both the dramaturgical structure and content of *Blasted*; this reaction was due in part to the initial establishment of the play within the frame of social realism. The 1995 performance text of *Blasted* fuses two primary stylistic/aesthetic components, the first of which is naturalism. While this is a loaded term that has been applied to describe various artistic and aesthetic

elements, my use of the term naturalism is derived from works such as David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* or Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, and describes a theatre that pays scrupulous attention to representing all facets of the imperfect human being onstage. Kane's writing expresses a raw and unrelenting approach to the violent action of the script. The content of *Blasted* depicts extreme events and characters that have been pushed to the absolute limit of humanity. The characters that Kane creates in *Blasted* are immensely flawed but painstakingly expressed in every minute detail of their humanness. In the initial production of *Blasted,* James Macdonald took a socially realistic approach in creating his mise en scène for the play, both in the acting and the design elements of the production. The implications of Macdonald's socially realistic framing and execution of Kane's text.

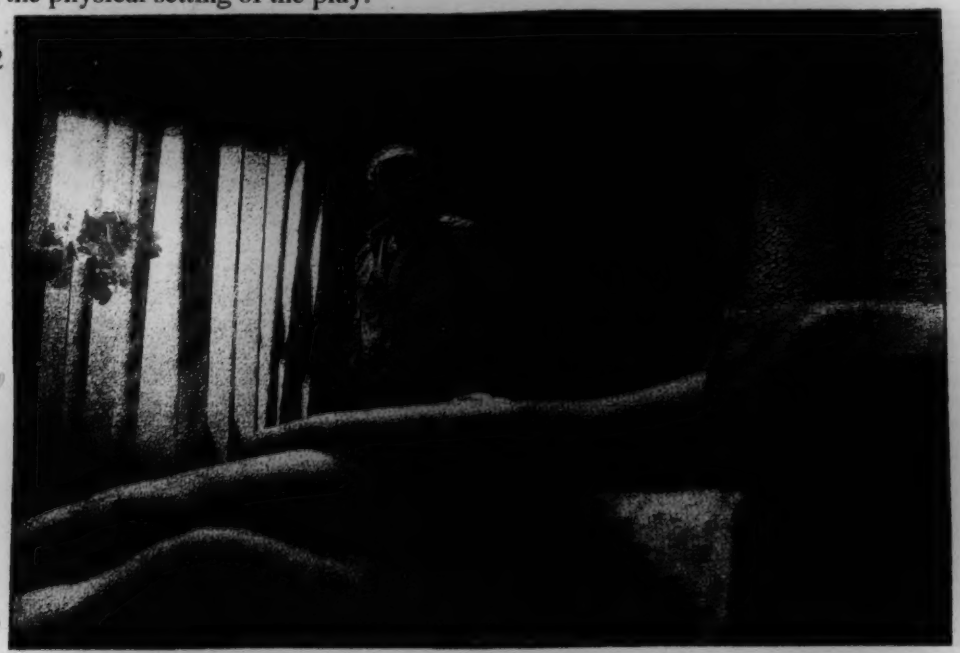
In the opening scene of the play, *Blasted* appears to be realistic in its dramaturgical structure as Cate (played by Kate Ashfield) and Ian (played by Pip Donaghy) appear as two Caucasian English people entering an anonymous, standard corporate hotel room. Kane outlines the set as:

> *A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive that it could be anywhere in the world. There is a large double bed. A mini-bar and champagne on ice. A telephone. A large bouquet of flowers. Two doors – one is the entrance from the corridor, the other leads off to the bathroom.* (3)

Kane's emphasis on the anonymous, impersonal appearance of a typical corporate hotel room suggests that it is intended to be readily recognizable to the audience. In his initial staging of the script, director James MacDonald, in collaboration with Sarah Kane and

costume and set designer Fraziska Wilcken, strictly adhered to the stage directions in creating the physical setting of the play.

Figure 2



(Kyncl)

The opening scene of the play is reminiscent of one of British playwright Alan Ayckbourn's socially realistic dramas, often set in an anonymous meeting room where the characters engage in a sexual romp or mysterious intrigue. Ian is wearing dark dress pants, a white shirt and suspenders which suggest that he has taken off a suit jacket to relax at the hotel. Cate is wearing a simple floral house dress which suggests a certain femininity and fragility. The audience is provided with minimal information about the characters, who seem almost as anonymous as the hotel room. Wilcken's set design has no distinguishing features to suggest anything exceptional about the room or the characters that enter into it. The ready-made box-like appearance of the set is reminiscent of the typical aesthetic used in creating a George F. Walker or Tracy Letts setting. Perhaps the only unusual element in the initial design is the absence of a television set, which in all likelihood was not immediately noticed by the audience.

However, Kane's specific omission of a television set intentionally enhances the idea of dislocating the characters in the hotel room from the larger world outside, since they have no ready access to external information. The absence of a television set also potentially causes a disconnect between the audience and the world of the play as it eliminates a sign central to the coding of an anonymous hotel room. In the opening scenes of the play, Macdonald presents visual images that align with the audience's existing horizon of expectations for a particular kind of realistic play, the form and codes with which they were very familiar. Through these images, Macdonald establishes social realism as the foundational code for reading the action of the play. Therefore, the audience is led to expect that they will be viewing a traditional play that follows a readily identifiable narrative structure. The naturalistic framing of the initial actions of *Blasted* is precise and extensive as each of the visual signs presented onstage indices a recognizable, rather innocuous domestic situation. Indeed, an image of a couple entering a hotel room where there is champagne, flowers and a bed is likely to be read by the audience as suggesting the potential for romance, celebration, a sexual romp or even a harrowing murder plot.

In the stage directions, Kane calls for a naturalistic and/or realistic approach to the staging of the play and dictates numerous detailed onstage effects:

> *Ian comes in, throws a small pile of newspapers on the bed, goes straight to the mini-bar and pours himself a large gin [...] Ian goes into the bathroom and we hear him run the water. He comes back in with only a towel around his waist and a revolver in his hand. He checks it is loaded and puts it under his pillows.* (3)

While Ian's possession of a gun may appears slightly incongruous with the domesticity of the hotel room, the characters' nonchalant treatment of it semiotically suggests to the spectator that the play will likely develop into something like an Agatha Christie thriller. As mentioned earlier, Macdonald closely adheres to Kane's stage directions in his production. The use of foods, liquids and the sound of running water contribute to the initial framing of the play as realistic.

Pip Donaghy (as Ian) and Kate Ashfield (as Cate) employ a realistic style of acting in their representation of the characters. The character of Cate has an air of vulnerability and naivety. When Ian goes into the bathroom, "*she puts her bag down and bounces on the bed. She goes around the room, looking in every drawer, touching everything. She smells the flowers and smiles*" (Kane 4). Cate's playful physical interaction with these everyday objects contrasts with Ian's dismissive attitude toward the objects and further aligns with a realistic aesthetic as it depicts commonplace actions and reactions. The fact that Cate and Ian actively use most of the objects in the room suggests a straightforward, uncomplicated phenomenological reading for the audience. While Ian does treat Cate in an abysmal manner, first verbally and then later physically abusing her while also remonstrating her for her lack of intelligence and sex appeal, this action is framed onstage in a psychologically realistic manner. The narrative scope of the opening scene of the play appears to be exploring the dynamics of the duo's relationship through a gritty realistic lens, emphasizing the script's naturalistic ideology.

The realistic mise en scène begins to deteriorate towards the end of the second scene with the arrival of the Soldier. To further destabilize the theatrical frame, Kane's writing and Macdonald's direction introduces this unrealistic element in a surprisingly

mundane manner. This creates a semiotic and narrative disconnect for the audience as they are presented with two contrasting theatrical codes: the absurdity and unreality of the action as opposed to the characters' realistic treatment of it, within the setting of a very realistic corporate hotel room. While looking out the bathroom window, Cate mentions that "Looks like there's a war on" (33). However, there are no visual or auditory signs and/or cues for the audience to read in order to confirm this assertion. Following a brief conversation between Cate and Ian regarding his supposed work as a spy there is a knock at the door. The tenuous frame of realism further slips as Ian chooses not to open the door but rather to enter into an apparent knock-knock game with the party on the other side of the door. This playful interaction layers on an incongruous farcical element to the play evocative of Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* and complicates the realistic reading of the play. This polysemic collision of theatrical forms and codes creates an almost absurd style which is then irrevocably altered when *"(h)e [Ian] opens the door. Outside is a Soldier with a sniper's rifle. Ian tries to push the door shut with his revolver. The soldier pushes the door open and takes Ian's gun easily. The two stand, both surprised, staring at each other*" (36). In Macdonald's production the Soldier is stereotypically dressed with camouflage pants, a soiled black t-shirt, combat boots and dog tags. While his entrance is somewhat bizarre, it initially does not appear completely out of line with the realistic plot that has been unfolding for the audience, partially because they have been set up to believe they will be viewing a socially realistic play and partly because of the mundane and understated manner of the Soldier's entrance.

The realism of the action, however, is further destabilized at the conclusion of the second scene while the Soldier, in hyper-realistic fashion, is standing and urinating on the bed[2]: "*There is a blinding light, then a huge explosion. Blackout. Sound of summer rain*" (39). In the production, there was a hole in the set that was camouflaged in the first two scenes, using curtains to make it appear as a window. During the blackout, presumably, the curtains were removed from the window to reveal a jagged hole in the hotel wall with some debris thrown onto the floor. (Figure 3)

Figure 3

(Kyncl)

In creating a structural and semiotic rupture at the conclusion of Scene Two, Kane clearly strips all signs on the stage of their perceived indices and reconstitutes their meanings in a manner unique to the play.

Helen Iball, in comparing *Blasted* to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (the first play to spark an outraged response at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956), argues that:

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[2] Macdonald's aesthetic suggests that this urination would have been simulated using water projected through a syringe to make the action appear realistic. However, this production detail has not been confirmed by the Royal Court Theatre.

> *Blasted* attempts a more radical disruption of the received theatre semiotic, from a starting position that 'mimicked a familiar form; namely the archetypal socio-realist Royal Court play passed on from Osborne; rather than an overtly disruptive image as Osborne had done with the ironing. Kane's approach might be termed phenomenological vandalism, a strategy that has been identified elsewhere through the coinage of the experiential or in-yer-face aesthetic. (327)

Iball's use of the term 'phenomenological vandalism' seems an apt description for the structure of the play text as the action of the play literally destroys the set and thus the physical world that its characters inhabited in the preceding scenes. It also shatters the semiotic and phenomenological expectations of the audience through the characters' interactions and the play's dramaturgy. This aspect of the text's content and form is amplified in performance as Kane initially creates a world which represents lived experiences recognizable to the audience only to then alter the signification code in an unfamiliar manner and completely destroy any connection between the signifier and the sign. For example, the sign of the bed, which originally appears to signify romance, sex and/or rest, becomes a sign of violence and death following the rape scenes and the Soldier's suicide. Also, the hotel room, which typically signifies shelter, is stripped of its indexical meanings as it is transported into the midst of a war zone. Throughout the latter half of the play, Kane slowly transforms the recognizable codes of images and representational models to a new set of codes, external and incongruous to the audience's lived experiences and expectations of theatrical forms. This structural strategy exemplifies Shlovsky's ostranenie as it transforms the recognizable theatrical codes into

ones alien to the spectator. This disruption is difficult for an audience to negotiate since it moves so far beyond their horizons of expectations.

The unique nature of the unanticipated attack on the realistic structure of the play, coupled with the literal attack on the set itself in the initial production of *Blasted,* produced shock in the audience. The explosion of the hotel room wall literally destroys the set. Figuratively, the explosion implies the destruction of the audience's connection with the work in which they have become invested and obliterates the identifiable realistic code that they had been using to read the play until this point. Moreover, this destabilization moves towards the liminoid for the audience as it breaks with their social expectations and their theatrical expectations. Within this transitional moment the spectator potentially remains uneasy as they are briefly forced to exist in a space which suggests the ever-present possibility of attack and the precarious nature of human existence. The realistic mise en scène of the blast itself enhances the phenomenological vandalism as it increases the uncertainty of whether the situation is real or staged for the audience member. In this liminoid moment of not knowing what they are watching, deprived of easy connections to their lives, the spectator's experience of the play sharply disconnects from their horizon of expectations. However, while the action creates some interesting figurative concepts, by its very nature the intensity of this deliberate destruction of the world of the play is in many ways self defeating; it attacks and to a certain extent destroys the audience's connection with the onstage action and therefore can result in their disengagement with the performance. While the dramaturgical construction of the play is an apt illustration of Shklovsky's formalist strategy of ostranenie which he hypothesized would allow the audience to perceive the content of

the work of art anew (in this case the violence of war), it also reveals the inherently problematic challenges that this strategy can present in the reception of the work.

Working in tandem with the phenomenological vandalism of the play, Kane frames the characters and their actions in a unique and somewhat jarring manner. It appears that it was this willfully destructive framing of the violent content which further exacerbated the negative reaction by the critics. In addition to exerting violence on the very structure and set of the play itself, the audience soon discovers that the explosion is only the beginning of a series of increasingly violent and aberrant acts by Ian and the Soldier which occur throughout the remainder of *Blasted.* Not only is the hotel blown up at the conclusion of Scene Two, but the traditional narrative structure of the play is also destroyed. The set, plot and characters which the audience have perceived as realistic are suddenly, inexplicably and profoundly altered. The play's direct attack on the spectator's experience of the initial world of the play is an aggressive and unusual tactic.

Following the debut production, several critics attributed this perceived stylistic incongruity of the play's form and structure to Kane's lack of writing skills. Michael Billington for the *Guardian* stated, "The reason the play falls apart is that there is no sense of external reality – who exactly is meant to be fighting who in the streets?" (1995). In *The Times*, Jeremy Kingston offered similar criticism: "James Macdonald's tight direction sustains the tension except somewhere around the middle when the play's intention still remains unclear" (1995). Michael Wright for *The Daily Telegraph* asserted that "the play loses its grip on any kind of reality and careers off into a gratuitous welter of carnage." This reception material suggests that part of the reason that the critics rejected and condemned the play was because it did not follow a

recognizable dramatic structure and form. Moreover, they condemned the play because it was not representational enough from the end of Scene Two until the conclusion of the play. In an interview with Dan Rebetello, Kane herself acknowledged that she anticipated criticism of her work: "If they don't have a clear framework in which to locate the play then they can't talk about it…Michael Billington couldn't say 'ah this is a nice bit of social realism – I can talk about this" (qtd in Saunders 41). Kane's acknowledgement of her deliberate manipulation of the potential response to the play suggests sophistication in her writing as opposed to the inexperience or ineptitude suggested by the critics.

Throughout Scenes Three to Five the violence of the action escalates and the narrative becomes progressively more and more disconnected from a linear plot line. Ken Urban interprets the implications of the dramatic structure in *Blasted* as dramatizing an ethics of catastrophe. Drawing on Giles Deleuze's principles of morality, Urban proposes:

> Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics. Ethics are subject to change, even optional emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being […] An ethics does not forsake the difference between good and bad, but views such distinctions as evaluations rooted in one's own existence […] Kane gives us a world of catastrophe. As with [Howard] Barker, hers is a theatre that offers neither solutions nor redemptions. (38)

Kane's decision to not imbue her play with a recognizable moral code is one of her most distinguishing dramaturgical features. Unlike other contemporary playwrights such as Anthony Neilson and Irvine Welsh who feature amoral characters and/or situations, Kane's work is exceptional in its openness to ethical interpretation. A close reading of the text suggests that Kane's characterization and plot action resists simplistic moral situating by the audience because the dramatic text, as Urban argues, creates a world within which standard moral codes disappear; this in turn challenges the audiences to negotiate unfamiliar terrain of a text that is discontinuous with their horizons of expectations. As Deleuzen ethics suggest and Urban interprets, individuals in times of war find that recognizable moral codes give way to the ethics of catastrophe as they find themselves in chaotic situations which cannot be navigated using the moral binary of right/wrong, good/evil. This ethical rather than moral situating permeates several facets of the play, from the plot structure to the characterization to the barrage of violent acts in the second half of the play.

This strategy of employing an open ethical code is shown in the portrayal of each character as their actions defy any moral categorization and are not easily separated into a binary representational model. In the case of Ian, his actions alternately place him in the role of victim and perpetrator as he moves from being the villain who rapes Cate to the rape victim of the Soldier and ultimately being left to die with his head poking out of the floorboards. Throughout the play the Soldier appears fairly villainous in his atrocious recounts of war crimes and when he rapes Ian. However, he exerts a similar violence on himself when he kills himself, suggesting that his character is tortured. The depiction of Cate is equally fluid as she vacillates between her status as a victim of Ian's

abuse and an aggressive rebel. Most notably, after Ian forces her to perform oral sex on him she bites his penis (31) yet later on returns to feed him as he lies dying.

The receptive critique of Kane's characterization may also be further complicated by the phallologocentricity of the English language. Social and linguistic theorist Tami Spry has explored the absence of linguistic options in the English language to express the female experience of sexual assault in terms not directly related to the phallus (28). Spry asserts that linguistically there are only two narrative subject positions of victim and survivor available for individuals who have been raped to express their experience (29). She argues that linguistically these subject positions usually function independently of one another and resist conflation (31). Spry's linguistic argument is a useful point of departure for examining the critics' reception of the perceived inconsistencies in characterization. Both incidents of rape in the play (Ian raping Cate and the Soldier raping Ian) follow a similar trajectory as they appear as just another link in a chain of violent acts. Moreover, neither one of the characters is easily relegated to either a victim or a survivor subject position, even though Cate and Ian go on vastly different journeys over the course of the play. In a confounding manner, at the end of the play the character of Cate appears to fulfill simultaneously the two phallologocentric narrative subject positions of victim and survivor. In collapsing this binary categorization through Cate's actions in the plot, Kane creates an ethical (rather than a moral) representation of how even the individual's body becomes a battleground in a time of war. The critics' responses to a certain extent illuminate the absence of linguistic options (as Spry suggests) to express this subject position in which the survivor is perpetually victimized. The absence of language to express this subject position

accentuates the challenges the spectator faces in reading the performance of *Blasted* and readily accepting its depiction of the ethical factors which shape society in war time. Urban's ethics of catastrophe interpretation supports Iball's appraisal of Kane's phenomenological vandalism as the audience watches the realistic and comprehensible world of the play explode. By watching a hole being blown in the wall of the hotel the audience bears witness to not only the deterioration of the realistic setting of the play but also, from then on, sees the characters move away from a recognizable moral code to enact an ethics of catastrophe.

Theatre critic Charles Spencer cites the lack of moral and/or narrative situating of the characters as a factor in his negative critique of the play. He writes, "How did the improbable duo meet? Kane can't be bothered to tell us. Nor can she decide whether the audience is meant to despise the wretched hack or feel sorry for him" ("Awful Shock"). Spencer's critique highlights the complications of Kane's character depictions. While Kane's approach to character development is not unique, the structural manner in which she frames it is quite innovative as it does not readily locate the audience members or characters in a fixed subject position; however, the opposite is the case in dominant representational models used in popular culture. Representations of violence in popular entertainment tend to consistently identify the good versus evil character binary within the meandering plot. As Charles Sharrett asserts in his introduction to *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*,

> Historical and structural analysis that conjoins, for example psychoanalysis to ideology is disturbing to many as it does not provide the comfort of treating the violent act as aberrant [...] Scapegoating has

> become as central to our official public discourse about social ills as it is to the marginalization and destruction of undesirable human beings (the poor, minorities) (19).

All of the characters in the play are alternately victims and perpetrators. This ongoing power shift resists creating a scapegoat perpetrator that can be blamed for the extreme ongoing violence which takes place in the second half of the play. The critics' discomfort stems from this inability to pin the blame on a specific character and decipher who is the villain. For the critics the perceived lack of a scapegoat extends even beyond the characters and world of the play because there is no identifiable internal moral coding or external forces instigating the actions. Within the world of *Blasted,* actions such as the rape become normalized and factual rather than completely aberrant.

In surveying the critical responses to *Blasted* it appears that the framing of the catastrophic content of the play in a structurally vandalistic frame was so anomalous with the average horizon of expectations that it elicited a strong response from the critics. The critical reception of *Blasted* is most aptly encapsulated by the news article in *The Daily Mail (London)* written by reporters Grace Bradbury and Steve Doughty on January 20, 1995, a few days following the premiere:[3]

> The reviews of *Blasted* painted it as possibly the most obscene work yet presented on a respectable London stage. They recorded a noxious spectacle featuring indecency, male rape, cannibalism of a dead baby, the sucking out of a man's eyes, masturbation, oral sex and defecation. Theatregoers could think of no parallel since 1980, when scenes of male

[3] The reporters reference, as do several critics, the scandal surrounding the 1980 production of Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* which saw director Michael Bogdonov charged with indecency. This legal case was prompted by the perceived reality of the representation of male/male rape onstage (Lawson).

> rape in Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* led a National Theatre director to the Old Bailey to answer a private prosecution for indecency. (Bradbury & Doughty)

Michael Billington for *The Guardian* takes a more aggressive tone and lists a litany of atrocities without any reference to the framework of the performance and/or the dramatic text:

> *Blasted* [...] contains scenes of masturbation, fellatio, micturation, defecation – ah those old familiar faeces! – homosexual rape, eye gouging and cannibalism. Far from crying, like the man in front of me: 'Bring back the censor,' I was simply wondering how such naïve tosh managed to scrape by the Court's normally judicious play-selection committee. (1995)

John Gross for *The Sunday Telegraph* echoes the dominant response by describing the play as "a gratuitous welter of carnage, cannibalism, male rape, eye gouging and other atrocities" ("John Gross on"). Charles Spencer for *The Daily Mail* characterized the play as "an adolescent parade of gratuitous shock tactics ranging from male rape to cannibalism" ("Awful Shock") and Jack Tinker called it a "disgusting feast of filth." The critics' comments illustrate the problematic nature of realistically staging moments of explicit violence as the violent events supersede all other images and narrative codes functioning onstage.

The most vehemently contested images and acts which surface in the reception material are the eye sucking, male rape and necrophagy. There is no denying that the representation of these acts onstage might disturb and/or disgust even the most hardened

spectator. In their reviews, the critics perceive these events to be gratuitous shock tactics and question the theatrical significance of staging these violent moments. However, a close semiotic interpretation of the performance text, coupled with the examination of the socio-cultural meanings of said images, reveals their profound depth and the cultural machinations at work that extend beyond the immediate shock value. In examining Kane's dramaturgical strategy of violence and violent imagery in conjunction with James MacDonald's mise en scène, a complex, multi-faceted interplay between the audience and the performance text emerges.

The rape of Ian by the Soldier is but one of the many violent acts the critics perceived as gratuitous. However, Kane had purpose and depth behind her decision to present it onstage as she did. Through aspects such as nonchalant dialogue, Ian's lack of resistance and the vulnerability of the Soldier, she re-framed the act in a non-traditional way to make it appear so casual that it illuminated the horror of the act. The matter of fact tone of Kane's dialogue offers a marked contrast between the actions and the emotions that surround it. In the text, the lead up to the rape is particularly unremarkable:

> SOLDIER. Turn over Ian.
>
> IAN. Why?
>
> SOLDIER. Going to fuck you
>
> IAN. No
>
> SOLDIER. Kill you then
>
> IAN. Fine
>
> SOLDIER. See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.

IAN. Yes

SOLDIER. And now you agree with anything I say. (He kisses Ian very tenderly on the lips. They stare at each other) You smell like her. Same cigarettes. (48)

The factual tone which Kane uses to set up the scene is vastly different to traditional rape narratives (Spry 28) as Ian offers no vocal or physical resistance nor appears at all surprised by the threat of the act. The stage directions for the action (employing the same objective naturalistic tone) read, "The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand. He holds the revolver to Ian's head with the other. He pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair. The Soldier is crying his heart out" (49). In his mise en scène, Macdonald followed the stage directions closely. Production Manager Paul Handley describes the mechanics of the staging as "the actors were positioned so that rape appeared to actually be happening onstage and Ian presented little to no resistance to the Soldier" (Handley). The factual tone and the vulnerability of the Soldier while he rapes Ian confound traditional notions of rape and contrasts with the rape of Cate as she actively attempts to fight off Ian.

In assessing the reception of rape in the critical reviews of *Blasted* a decisive cultural valuation of rape emerges. It was solely the incidence of male/male rape which elicited a negative response in the press while any objections to the sexual assault of Cate are notably absent. It is of interest to note that a similar response occurred in the reception of Howard Brenton's play *The Romans in Britain* in which the offstage rape of a woman was not deemed in anyway offensive or objectionable while the onstage representation of male rape resulted in a lawsuit for indecency (Defraeye "The

Romans"). The prevalence of representations of female rape by a male appears to be so great that individuals have become completely desensitized to these images. Moreover, in contemporary Western society there is an abundance of discursive response to the rape of females while there is still a distinct absence of information and/or research in the area of male/male rape.

The reception of the male/male rape would have been influenced by the social discourse surrounding it. The current mode of defining male rape categorizes the act as either an aggressive homosexual act or as situational homosexuality where the body of the male is violated as a substitute for an unavailable female body (Hensley). This limited framework for reading representations of male rape offers little insight into the rape of Ian by the Solider; instead, the act requires reading within the narrative framework of the play in order to grasp its significance. Graham Saunders suggests that,

> In *Blasted* Kane uses the motif of sexual violence, whereby Ian's rape of Cate is later revisited on him by the Soldier, who in turn uses the act of rape on Ian for a specific purpose, namely to come to terms with the rape and murder of his girlfriend Col by a group of soldiers. The tale he recounts and the literal re-enactment on Ian of her rape and blinding culminate in his suicide, as the only way of truly connecting with his murdered lover. ("Vile" 71)

Saunders' interpretation provides a valuable contrast to the critical reviews of *Blasted* as it situates this moment within the scope of the entire play. As Kane comments in an interview with Aleks Sierz, "I asked myself: What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia? One is

the seed the other is the tree" (Kane qtd in Sierz *In-yer-face* 101). *Blasted,* in other words, represents the cyclical nature of violence through its depictions of rape. Within the world of the play rape is depicted as a seemingly inevitable, normative act that is not only forced upon the victim but also the rapist and is representative of the cycles of violence still prevalent in society. Staging a scene of male/male rape represents the enactment of a fundamental socio-cultural taboo as it calls into question social codes of desire, sexual hierarchy and ultimately demands a complete paradigm shift if it is to be read within the ideological context that Kane proposes.

In Macdonald's 1995 production at the Royal Court Theatre, the combination of the factual text coupled with the immediacy of witnessing the representation of the physically realistic rape of Ian onstage within the confines of the Jerwood Theatre was read as a sensational event by the critics. The shock of seeing male rape embodied onstage in front of the audience would have been unexpected and extremely discontinuous with their expectations as the predominant and habitualized representation of rape in contemporary theatre is that of a vaginal rape by a male perpetrator. The actual staged rape scene in the production of *Blasted* resulted in a distinct reductionist reception because the significance attached to an attack on heterosexual male dominance supersedes the other signs at work in the scene, both textual and visual. The reception of the representation of male/male rape in *Romans in Britain* demonstrated a similar reductionist reading as theatre critics (and legal teams) read the event as sensational rather than as an act of warfare or colonization as it is suggested within the narrative framework of the play (Defraeye "The Romans"). As discussed earlier, in reading the entire text of *Blasted* the meaning of rape can be extended beyond Ian so that his rape

stands as a representation for the repetitive cycle of violence at work in society, extending from bedrooms to battlegrounds. Nevertheless, for the critics reading the performance the male/male rape was literalized. They read it solely as an isolated act of rape rather than reading the action in terms of its hermeneutical implications within the overarching scope of the play. However, this shocking action does have a positive aspect as the critics' perception of rape was confronted and re-sensitized.

Interestingly enough, in the case of the 2001 production of *Blasted*, also directed by James Macdonald at the Royal Court, critics did not express any objections to this sequence of action in the play even though it was staged in a similar manner. Retrospectively, it appears that the outrage expressed over this sequence was in large part due to the novelty and rarity of representing male rape onstage in a nonchalant and normalized manner. In 2001, this sequence would have been a part of the critics' expectations for the show which likely diminished, the reception of the action as shocking.

The action of the Soldier sucking out and consuming Ian's eyes in the performance is another element of the perceived gratuitous or freakish violence Kane uses in the plot. This action is framed in a similar manner to the rape of Ian. In the overarching narrative structure of the play this action further heightens and stresses the cyclical nature of violence and traumatic memory. The tone of the scene presents it as an act that the Soldier feels compelled to commit after recounting the horrific acts of barbarism which he has both perpetrated and witnessed while fighting in the war.

IAN. Are you going to kill me?

SOLDIER. Always covering your own arse.

The Soldier grips Ian's head in his hands. He puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye.

SOLDIER. He ate her eyes. Poor Bastard. Poor love. Poor Fucking bastard.

Blackout. The sound of autumn rain. (50)

Production manger Paul Handley recounts that the action of the eye sucking was staged to appear graphically realistic: the Soldier had blood bags in his mouth which he burst as he 'sucked' out Ian's eyes. As in the case of the male/male rape, the Soldier connects his actions to the assault and murder of his girlfriend Col. In performance the extremity of the violence coupled with the increasingly unrelated and violent nature of the plot makes it unsurprising that the critics read the image as a literal and therefore closed moment of unnecessary violence rather than a moment which is open to further interpretation. By employing a graphic and crude mise en scène the action of the eye-sucking supersedes the context of traumatic memory.

Most critics include this moment on the list of violent acts which they found offensive and/or gratuitous within the scope of the play. Charles Spencer in particular offers a pointed description of the scene as "a soldier bursts in and describes in lip-smacking detail the appalling atrocities he has committed elsewhere, rapes the hack at gunpoint and then, the coup de grace, bites his eyes out and consumes them with relish" ("Awful Shock"). As in the case of several of the critics, Spencer reads the naturalized violent actions of the Soldier as an isolated act of rape. His comments illustrate the

problematic nature of Kane's dramaturgy when combined with Macdonald's mise en scène.

The constant barrage of increasingly violent and horrific acts that quickly follow one another in the latter half of the play tend to overdose the spectator on violence to such an extent that the reading of them in terms of their hermeneutical value is short circuited. This negative reaction to the representation of uncontextualized violence is similar to the example explored in the first chapter in which the 24hour British News Network received massive criticism following their coverage of the Persian Gulf War. In that case the spectators, and in this case the critics, articulate a desire for moral situating and situational contextualization. While the critics appear to be searching for narrative plot connections to situate the acts of violence in relation to one another, their perception of the play's structure falling apart is actually an integral component of its dramaturgical construction. Moreover, Macdonald's choice to employ a realistic acting style to execute these extremely violent actions appears to have once again resulted in the reductionist reading of this action similar to the reductionist reception of the male rape.

While Macdonald's mise en scène does communicate the horror of the violence through the use of the blood bags and the mimed chewing of the eyeballs, the amplification of the brutality by its naturalized execution proves to limit its hermeneutic potential. Specifically, in surveying the reception material it appears that the critics were so shocked by this action – and likely were curious about the mechanics of its execution – that their entire focus was on the action itself, rather than interpreting the implications of it. Astonishingly, Kane actually drew this action from a real life incident she read

about in Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs* (a non-fiction exploration of football violence) where an undercover police officer pretending to be a Manchester United supporter had his eye sucked out and spit on the floor during a football brawl in a pub (qtd Sierz *In-yer-face* 102). Speaking to Aleks Sierz she commented

> "I just couldn't fucking believe what I'd read; I couldn't believe that a human being could do this to another person. I put it in the play and everyone was shocked [...] The only reason it's any more devastating than reading a newspaper is that all the boring bits have been cut out. (qtd in Sierz *In-yer-face* 103)

Kane's comments acknowledge the shocking nature of the action of her play, while also suggesting that this shock was a deliberate tactic employed in order to elicit a renewed perception and horrified reaction to violence. Ironically Kane's comment illustrates the fundamental receptive problem that arose from the eye-sucking sequence: because she uses numerous horrific actions, the 'boring bits' of connecting plot information are left out. Therefore the action is read by some as not only shocking, but seemingly impossible and unreal bordering on the ridiculous while at the same time impossible to dismiss.

As discussed, the intensity of the shock produced by the eye sucking action has potentially problematic elements in terms of the audience's reception of the play because it offers a closed, literal reading of the action as pure and isolated violence disconnected from other the accumulation of violent acts. However, the dramatic action of blinding a character onstage is not a new concept, nor are the receptive problems that accompany it. The blinding intertextually references the infamous images of both Oedipus (who

admittedly is blinded offstage and then re-enters blind) and Gloucester from *King Lear*. In an interview with Graham Saunders, Kane elaborated on her choice to blind Ian:

> Someone actually said to me after they read the first draft, Have you read *Lear?* [*in the interview used for this article Saunders was discussing Shakespeare's King Lear with Kane and therefore I interpret her use of the phrase Lear to refer to the Shakespearian text*] And then I read *Lear* and I thought there's something about blinding that is really theatrically powerful. And given also that Ian was a tabloid journalist I thought in a way it was a kind of castration, because obviously if you're a reporter your eyes are actually your main organ. So I thought rather than have him castrated, which felt melodramatic, I could go for a more metaphorical castration. (qtd in "Vile" 72)

In this conversation Kane identifies the intertextual reference to *King Lear;* however, there is also blinding/eye-sucking imagery in Edward Bond's *Lear* (produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1971) which is another potential case of intertextuality. The layering of intertextual references is particularly significant in evaluating the critical reception of the debut production as critics such as Jack Tinker, Michael Billington and Charles Spencer would have likely been very familiar with the two aforementioned plays. Therefore, for a critical audience, the action is not only immediately horrifying but would also potentially invoke the receptive memories from other theatrical productions which are a significant component of their horizon of expectations. For the spectator, the interplay of reading *Blasted* against and with their previous theatrical experiences would most likely amplify the horror because of the unique manner in which

Kane frames the eye-sucking action. Moreover, the spare dialogue Kane uses for this scene sharply contrasts with the work of Shakespeare while echoing Bond.

Studies regarding the ongoing reception of the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* offer further insight into the reception of *Blasted.* As in the case of *Blasted*, the onstage blinding in *King Lear* tends to perpetually evoke a provocative and shocking reception. Shakespearean scholar Edward Pechter suggests that

> there are, of course, two notorious instances of the play's brutality towards us: the blinding of Gloucester (or more precisely the spectator being forced to bear witness to his blinding) and the crushing of our hopes at the end with Cordelia's murder. But the play's violence pervades generally and adheres deeply in the way it presents its characters and involves its audience. Shakespeare usually unfolds characters gradually [...] But in this play we are confronted with sudden and inexplicable eruptions of savage will. (182)

Pechter's comment illustrates the fundamental problem with blinding a character onstage: the audience perceives it as an attack on them and their experience of the world of the play. The blinding is a fundamentally disabling act, both for the character and often for the audience. If we interpret sight as metonymic for the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the theatrical medium, then the audience can potentially interpret the blinding of a character as not only an attack on their enjoyment but also on their privileged position as a spectator of the onstage action. Although Ian and Gloucester are of different statuses and have very different functions within the plays, the suddenness of the violence inflicted on Ian is similar to the execution of Gloucester's

blinding in *King Lear* as in one shocking instant they are subjected to an extreme violent act. This is similar to what the audience experiences: they have also been subjected to a violent act, as identified by Pechter, and this causes them to react as witnesses rather than spectators, signifying an attack on the traditional mode of spectatorship. The eye sucking in *Blasted* becomes even more confounding for the audience than other scenes of blinding because, while blindness is often metonymic to insight, Ian never seems to gain this attribute but rather retains his narrow-minded perspective. The intertextual referencing also short circuits the reception of the moment because the violence of the action onstage does not actually further any narrative development as in *Oedipus, King Lear* and *Lear,* but rather is an end unto itself until the next horrific image emerges.

The most ghastly moment of the play occurs when Ian eats the corpse of the dead baby. Kane's choice to depict necrophagy onstage resonates on several levels due to both the appalling nature of the action and the unorthodox manner in which it is framed. She describes the action in the stage directions as, "*Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby's body out. He eats the baby. He puts the remains back in the baby's blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole. A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor*" (60). The grotesque and graphic nature of this action was further exacerbated in the performance as Ian crawls, clothes askew, with blood covering his eye sockets across the floor to scavenge for the corpse. To achieve the effect of a rotting infant corpse, the production team used the form of a doll stuffed with broken up Mars bars (Handley). By physically representing the act in front of a live audience using somewhat realistic and crude production effects, MacDonald fulfilled Kane's unusual framing of this unparalleled horror. This moment

of action encapsulates two or three of the greatest socio-cultural taboos, cannibalism and necrophagy, not to mention violating a baby's corpse. Kirstin Guest proposes that "the idea of cannibalism prompts a visceral reaction among people *because* it activates our horror of consuming others like ourselves (3). In *Blasted,* the representation of cannibalism/necrophagy heightens this visceral reaction even more by having Ian eat not just a dead person, but a dead baby.

While the event serves as a pinnacle of a series of extremely violent actions within the play, the reception of it is especially problematic as its framework does not fall within the dominant modes of cannibalistic representations. Generally, cannibalistic representations tend to fall into three distinct categories: ritual, survival and deviant (murderers) (Petrinkovich 6). Ian's eating of the baby does not fall clearly into any of these categories as he digs up the baby in a moment of despair, eats it, reburies it and then dies. Due to the seemingly irrational and pointlessness of the action, it tends to be perceived by the critics as an extreme and fairly ineffective shock tactic.

As a result of staging this incomprehensible action using a doll stuffed with Mars bars, it appears to have been received as completely ridiculous and outlandish by the critics. Because the audience surely knows that a doll is being used as opposed to trying to make it look realistic, it makes the action appear preposterous and even potentially humorous rather than tragic and horrifying. The baby-eating scene actually received several mocking, tongue in cheek references in the reviews as the critics express incredulity at the inclusion of this act in the overall perceived barrage of violence. Jack Tinker concludes that "the play becomes so risible the only thing to do is laugh." Jeremy Kingston writes "and, since hunger can make necrophages of us all, a venture into grave

robbing?" while Charles Spencer flippantly writes "and then the hack takes a few bites out of the baby ("The Arts: Awful Shock"). In his review of the play Michael Billington seems to identify one of the key receptive issues for a spectator watching *Blasted.* He suggests, "by the time the blinded, hungry hack is reduced to digging up the floorboards to devour a dead baby [...] we have supped so full with horrors that we are reduced to bombed out indifference" (Review of *Blasted* Jan 19, 1995). Kane's layering of violent and horrific acts almost seems to become self defeating as it eventually turns the reaction from purely horrified to horrified disbelief to indifference. Thus, despite any deeper meaning which Kane intended within the larger context of the play, the disruption to the average critics' expectations and the natural horror felt at witnessing acts depicting society's most entrenched taboos (male/male rape, eye sucking, infant necrophagy) the critics focused on the violence of the acts in their reviews rather than the interpretive significance of them. It is noteworthy that this action perpetually resurfaces as a staging challenge. In other performances of *Blasted* directors have opted not to literally stage the eating of the baby; for example, in the Graeae Theatre Company's production this action is mimed while the stage directions are read.

In the 1995 production of *Blasted* the depiction of violence was aurally and visually graphic and explicit. In interpreting the reception material from this production, we can see that this explicitness resulted in three primary reactions of provocation, indifference and/or irritation from the theatre critics. Due to the extremity of the violent actions represented onstage, these actions became the defining code for the audience's reading of the play as they superseded all other codes at work onstage. Kane and Macdonald have both emphasized that the violent form and content of *Blasted* serves the

action/artistry of the play; however, regardless of the intentions governing the performance, using extreme violence onstage is inherently problematic. While the form of *Blasted* is continuous with Kane's intended meaning on the incomprehensibility of the widespread destruction caused by war it comes at a great cost. Due to the vandalistic nature of the play's structure and the explicitness of the violence it goes so far as to virtually prevent the spectator from having a point of structural accessibility to the hermeneutical implications of the content and form of the performance text. David Graver argues that

> Although violence can disguise meaning and join the semiotic transactions of the stage its presence generally threatens both to escape the meaning assigned to it and to disrupt the delicate balance theatrically established between the ontological priorities of display and enactment. Consequently violence is hard to hold within a theatrical context. It has a volatility that either writes its own burning meanings upon the world or wipes out all meanings in a firestorm of senseless eradication. (48)

The reception material from Macdonald's production of *Blasted* serves as a poignant illustration of Graver's statement. By analyzing how the critics framed their descriptions of the violence onstage, it becomes apparent that the critics read the violence, as Graver implies, primarily in literal terms of spectacle and/or freakish display. They were provoked by the perceived lack of character/narrative motivation or enactment surrounding the violent acts, and while these elements can be found in the play text, in the initial performance they were receptively displaced by the explicitness of the violence.

The extreme violence combined with the social taboos of male/male rape, eye-sucking and infant necrophagy, which Kane frames in a phenomenologically vandalistic manner, led to the critics' reductionist reading of Macdonald's 1995 production of *Blasted*. The violence of these elements became the primary (and often the only) sign system that the critics used to read the performance, leading them to write a series of scathing reviews critiquing Kane's dramaturgy. Kane's comments on her construction of the play suggest that this was a reaction she and Macdonald had anticipated. Certainly, a survey of the reception material suggests that they more than succeeded in shocking and provoking their audiences. As Jack Tinker wrote in his infamous review "until last night I thought I was immune from shock in any theatre. I am not [...] For utterly and entirely disgusted I was by a play which appears to know no bounds of decency, yet has no message to convey by way of excuse". This shock, however, was relatively short lived in the reception history of *Blasted.* After the initial scandal surrounding the debut of *Blasted* in 1995, the play went on to be produced in: Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Korea, Portugal, Italy, Australia, France and America. One of the most notable and internationally renowned productions of *Blasted* was developed by Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne Theatre (Berlin) in 1996 where it remains in repertory today. This production employs a highly technical mise en scène in which a large plasma screen television mounted on metal stalk relays flashes of news into the hotel room. These news clips are constantly changed and updated to stay current (Halliburton). The staging of *Blasted* that was performed in Johannesburg (South Africa) in 2002 featured a black actor as the Soldier and caused quite a controversy (Fisher). In surveying the production history of *Blasted,* it appears that the text translates well to

elsewhere in the world as it is perpetually reinterpreted in a nationalistically relevant manner emphasizing the universal relevance of the text. Interestingly enough, this text was not staged again in Britain until 2001. Following Kane's death in 1999, this "disgusting feast of filth" was transformed into a celebrated example of British playwriting and exemplified the aesthetic of "Cool Britannia". This canonization of *Blasted* reduced its power to shock and horrify; in the following chapter, I will analyze one company's attempt to introduce elements which reinstate the original shock, both in the form and the content.

Chapter 3: The Audience Reception of Graeae Theatre Company's *Blasted* 2006/07

In the four years between its debut in 1995 and the death of Sarah Kane in 1999, *Blasted* went from being one of the most critically reviled British plays to one of the most celebrated. It gained general acceptance and garnered critical acclaim and, since 1995, has been in constant production throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. The catalyst behind this change in perception was due in part to Kane's death; as director Thomas Ostermeier (who has been directing Kane's works in Berlin since 1997) so bluntly puts it,

> To be honest, this has to do with Sarah Kane's suicide. That made her glamorous and seemed to prove that whatever she was writing about, she really meant it. That's a stupid idea but it brings in the public. Some people think that her plays explain her death. (qtd in Sierz "For us")

This attitude has permeated the reception of Kane's plays since her death, and can be seen not only in the fact that nearly all reviews of her plays since her death mention her suicide but also in the decision by the Royal Court Theatre, at its cultural zenith in 2001, to stage a Sarah Kane season to showcase her collected plays. In the reviews of the production of *Blasted* that was presented as part of the Royal Court's Sarah Kane season, critics Michael Billington (2001) and Charles Spencer (2001) publicly recanted their previous scathing critiques of the play and then applauded its depth and the impeccable stagecraft of Kane's writing. Spencer went so far as to open his review with "WELL, I was wrong. [...] in 1995, I was convinced it was meretricious rubbish produced by a young writer with an adolescent desire to shock [...] Yet seeing the play six years on, there is no doubt that it is an impressive, and serious piece of work" (2001). Similarly,

Billington writes "Five years ago I was rudely dismissive about Sarah Kane's *Blasted.* Yet watching its revival last night I was overcome by its sombre power" (2001). However, this receptive metamorphosis of *Blasted* was not only due to Kane's death. It also evolved through a complex series of events and crucial shifts in both the political and artistic spheres, including factors such as the end of the Thatcher political era, the events of September 11, 2001, the rise in popularity of In-yer-face theatre in England and abroad, and the unparalleled commercial success of the Young British Artists (YBAs), especially Damien Hirst.

As mentioned, the shift towards a positive reception of *Blasted* was likely influenced by the socio-political maneuvering of Tony Blair and the New Labour Party in the wake of the Thatcher era. Ken Urban cites the second half of the 1990s as a time when "Britishness became Britain's favorite fetish… The world took notice and politicians such as Tony Blair took advantage of the rebranding of London as the global capital of cool" (Cruel Britannia 354). At this time, several of the In-Yer-Face playwrights had works produced throughout Western Europe and North America. In particular, Thomas Ostermeier, the director of Berlin's Schaubühne Theatre, staged a production of *Blasted* in 1999 and has kept the play in repertory ever since. Urban stresses that, "Blair hoped that Britain's image would change, accentuating a vitality and creativity at odds with the old, nostalgic vision of Merrie England. New Labour looked at Britain as a brand, a commodity to be managed and marketed" (Cruel Britannia 356). The marketing machine of New Labour promoted the young and violent aesthetic as trendy and inherently cool and this, in turn, dramatically altered the reception of the In-yer-face works. It became enjoyable for many spectators to be offended, provocation

became a desired product, and the ability to withstand or even relish the experience was seen as a mark of distinction. This attitude featured prominently in theatre and art reviews from the time; as John Peter wrote for the *Sunday Times*, "Those with a strong body and mind should see this play. Kane died two years ago aged 28, and the Court is right to celebrate her strange and tormented talent" (2001). Interestingly enough, this desire of the spectator to be provoked and/or offended was similar to the response to the provocative theatre of the 1960s, such as Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965) or Kenneth Tynan's *Oh Calcutta*! (1968) which attracted substantial audiences largely due to their controversial content.

In conjunction with its absorption into the mainstream theatrical canon stagings of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* tends to literally follow the staging outlined in the text which in turn results in productions that fulfill the audiences' horizons of expectations. There often seems to be an artistic hesitancy to radically reinterpret this text. Productions in Germany, Mexico, Croatia, Denmark and Australia all seem to employ a fairly realistic, technically enhanced mise en scène, and as such these productions tend not to elicit a provoked reception such as in the case of the low budget Royal Court Theatre 1995 production. However, the Graeae Theatre Company's production of *Blasted* in 2006/2007 explodes the conditioned reductive reception of *Blasted* that was brought on by its acceptance into the British canon by reframing the iconic violent imagery and language of *Blasted* in newly provocative ways. In their staging, they use performance strategies such as the casting of disabled actors and the incorporation of accessibility techniques (making the content of the play accessible to the visually and hearing impaired) to interrogate the spectator's phenomenological and semiotic understanding of

the world of the play. The critics assert in their reviews that they found this kind of multi-faceted production difficult to negotiate as it challenged the spectator to be more aware of his/her social perceptions and subject position. With Sarah Kane's death and the absorption of *Blasted* into the British theatrical canon, the framing devices that strategically disturbed the audience in Macdonald's debut production had become evacuated of their provocative power. By staging this now-iconic play using the socially foreign framework of disability, the Graeae Theatre Company's performance strategically manipulates the anticipated reception of the theatrical medium to elicit a renewed perception of both the content and form of *Blasted.* The Graeae Theatre Company develops framing techniques that are vastly different from those used in Kane's original script and Macdonald's 1995 production to present a fresh and, for a few moments at least, a provocative production of *Blasted* that confronts the spectators with their own social perceptions of disability and the experience of personal violence within a socio-cultural context.

Traditionally speaking, disabled performance has existed in the public sphere to either elicit sympathy in order to garner donations (compassionate) or to serve as a therapeutic outlet for the individuals involved. However, the Graeae Theatre Company creates professional, aesthetically-based productions which resist the typical compassionate or therapeutic mode of representation; as the mandate of the Graeae Theatre Company reads,

> Graeae is a disabled-led theatre company that profiles the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments. The artistic approach creates aesthetically accessible productions that include a

> disabled and non-disabled audience. Graeae also promotes the inclusion of disabled people in professional performance. (Graeae Artistic Statement)

General Manager Kevin Walsh emphasizes that the Company actively resists the medical mode of representation and seeks to create "an entirely new aesthetic" (Walsh). The medical mode of representation was developed in the late nineteenth century and included disabled individuals who were identified and defined by their medical ailments. For example, there was a nineteenth century freak show exhibition of Sealo, a boy who had Phocmelia, which is a condition that leaves the person with a very short stature and seal-like limbs. Freak shows like these presented disabled individuals in a context that only referenced their disability and did not present a complete human being. In response to this approach to disability, the Graeae Theatre Company created a production called *The Last Freakshow* (1999) which attempted to reframe the freakshow narrative structure and highlight the extent to which individuals with physical disabilities are defined by their medical conditions (Kuppers 32-38). In one scene from the production, Mat Fraser, who has Phocmelia himself, performed the role of the side-show talker (rather than Sealo) in a reconstruction of the nineteenth century exhibition. As in the case of *The Last Freakshow*, the Graeae Theatre Company tends to create work that consciously incorporates the physical disabilities of the performers into an aesthetic framework that simultaneously reinforces and questions stereotypes.

The Artistic Director of the company, Jennifer Sealey, directed the 2006 production of *Blasted*, which initially toured throughout the United Kingdom and played in smaller theatres. Following the success of the tour, the company was offered an

opportunity to remount the production at the Soho Theatre in London from January 16-February 3, 2007, with tickets from 7.50£ for matinees and ranging between 10-20£ for evening performances (the performances later in the run were priced at 15-20£) which made it fairly accessible to the general public. The Soho Theatre has a seating capacity of 140 and is a raked theatre with fixed bench seating located on Dean St. in the heart of London's West End (Soho). This theatre has housed numerous In-yer-face productions over the course of the last decade by playwrights such as Tracy Letts and Mark Ravenhill.

The Graeae production of *Blasted* brings new meaning and a renewed violence to the play through its unconventional treatment of actors with physical disabilities and various production elements. In her directorial comments on the play, Sealey states,

> An early conversation with Simon Kane, Sarah Kane's brother, focused upon the fact that all three characters in *Blasted* are or can be perceived as being disabled. Therefore placing disabled actors within the narrative allows a different interpretation of the play. This promises to be an extremely exciting and potentially explosive evening of theatre. (Graeae *Blasted*)

In addition to casting actors with physical disabilities in the play, Sealey also employs several aesthetic innovations in her staging. In keeping with the mandate of the company, the production is designed to be accessible to individuals with vision or hearing impairments, and thus Sealey includes sign language interpreters, subtitles typed onto background screens, and the speaking aloud of stage directions. However, Sealey does not merely provide access to individuals with a sensory impairment but rather

develops these accessibility techniques in an aesthetic manner to add another layer of meaning onto the performance text. As Judith Kilvington (Executive Director) describes,

> Traditionally, blind and visually impaired audience members listen to audio description through an infra red system with the description spoken by someone who only has a one-off connection with the production... Jenny Sealey's vision for *Blasted* is to vocalise the words in square brackets [Kane's stage directions] to intensify the experience for blind and visually impaired audiences but also to develop further the roles of the actors through artistic decisions: who says which stage direction and why? The actors are joined by an actor/signer who translates and comments on what they see. (Graeae Education Pack 6)

As Kilvington suggests, the actors playing the lead characters speak some of the stage directions aloud. To further enhance this strategy there is also an audio interpreter who reads some of the stage directions while also commenting on the onstage action. However, rather than having this commentary restricted to personal headsets for the visually impaired, it is amplified through speakers and incorporated into the performance text itself, thus making it available to the general audience. There is also a live projection of a fourth actor on the screen at the rear of the stage who signs the stage directions and the dialogue. Over the course of the play, there are different sign language interpreters who take turns interpreting and commenting on the action and who loosely resemble each of the characters.

The mise en scène that Sealy and designer Jo Paul created for *Blasted* is quite complex and facilitates the connection between the audio commentators/interpreters, sign language interpreters and characters in a dynamic and aesthetically loaded manner. The cast consists of three actors who have physically manifest disabilities: Jennifer Jay Ellison (as Cate) who has a movement disorder and appears very fragile, David Toole (as the Soldier) who is of a very short stature and born without legs, and Gerard McDermott (as Ian) who has a visual impairment. Across the back of the stage there is a screen which features the live projection of the sign language interpreter who translates the dialogue and also comments on the onstage action. As well, the stage directions being spoken by the actors are also typed to appear as subtitles on the screen. (Figure 4)

Figure 4 (Paul)

The angled planes of the set are especially interesting as they require careful and concentrated navigation by the actors. Jo Paul's set is a more abstract, less realistic interpretation of a Leeds hotel room than the one created by Francizka Wilcken in the 1995 debut production of the play. Almost all of the action onstage takes place on a

tilted square which delineates the confines of the hotel room. The abstract set provides a striking juxtaposition to the unflinching realness of the actors' physical disabilities.

After the explosion of the hotel room wall at the conclusion of Scene Two of *Blasted*, the furniture is broken down and tossed around the stage while the projection of the interpreter becomes limited to one small component of the screen (Figure 5).

Figure 5 (Paul)

While the set design component of Sealey's mise en scene is primarily abstract and non-realistic, the costumes in this production appear realistic in nature. Cate is dressed in a simple floral shirt dress, Ian wears a white dress shirt with dark dress pants and the Soldier wears a military green t-shirt with camouflage pants. The realistic costume design further escalates the tension between the abstract aspects of the production and the corporeal reality of the actors with physical disabilities. The physical reality of the actor's extraordinary bodies and the psychologically realistic style of acting that the actors employ – they remain in character even when they are reciting the stage directions – creates a complex multi-dimensional framing of the performance. It is significant to

note that the recitation of stage directions serves as an indirect descriptive interaction with the audience, rather than instructing the actors as to how to move onstage.

The reception material generated in response to Graeae's production of *Blasted* is of an entirely different nature than that of the initial production in 1995. The reviews tend to critique the casting choices and debate the success of the incorporation of accessibility techniques (for the hearing and visually impaired) into the aesthetic framing of the performance. There were relatively few critical reviews published on this production and most noticeably absent are production reviews from esteemed critics such as Michael Billington (for *The Guardian*), Charles Spencer (for *The Daily Telegraph*) and Benedict Nightengale (for *The Times*). Due to the sheer number of plays in production in London at any given time, it is certainly not unusual for smaller productions to not receive a review by the leading critics. However, given the iconic status of *Blasted* as well as of the playwright in London, the sophistication of direction which Sealey presents and the initial critical success that the production met on tour, the absence of reviews in major publications suggests an interesting critical and cultural valuation. Why is it that British cultural institutions apparently perceive productions created by performers with disabilities to be excluded from the realm of aesthetic representation?

As in the original staging of *Blasted*, this interpretation by Sealey of the work is phenomenomologically vandalistic and presents resistance to established theatrical and social codes. Mainstream commercial theatre in Britain today often retains the theatrical conventions and codes established in the thriving environment of Granville Barker's Court Theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First and foremost

these conventions dictate a representational rather than presentational theatrical frame. Within this theatrical frame the audience expects that actors are neutral, able-bodied vehicles for depicting characters. For the most part, the theatrical experience is considered to be an imaginary exercise which allows the spectator to become immersed in the fictional world of the play. The casting of an actor with a physical disability creates a complex layering effect for the spectator as they slip between reading the character that the actor represents and the constant, unavoidable presence of the physical disability. The presence of actors with manifest physical disabilities onstage destabilizes the spectator's codified reading of theatre. With physically-able actors, many different representational signs and codes can be layered onto their bodies. However, the physical manifestation of disability is invariably read by the spectator as only disability, and therefore the casting of an actor with a physical disability can be interpreted as a betrayal of representational theatrical conventions. Throughout this production of *Blasted*, the audience is explicitly made aware of the fact that the physical disability of the actors adds an additional layer onto the characterization of the roles that they are playing. In turn, a spectator can potentially read the actor's physical manifestation of disability as alternately heightening and/or diminishing the strength of the character representation.

The choice to cast physically disabled actors was raised in some reviews, albeit couched in politically correct terms. Critic Rosie Millard expresses concern over the safety and appropriateness of casting Jennifer Jay Ellison, who has a mobility disorder which affects her legs and physical frame. Please note that, as per the request of Graeae Theatre Company, the medical terms for the actors' disabilities will not be included, but

rather a more general description of their physical body and disability[4]. In *The New Statesman* Rosie Millard describes Ellison's performance as:

> Sucking her thumb and prone to disconcerting fits, Cate is clearly a vulnerable target who wants to be fondled more like a puppy than a sex object. It is easy to see why Ellison, a disabled performer with clearly visible leg supports, was cast in the role; her extreme thinness and apparent physical instability make one fear for her, not least because the designer (Jo Paul) has lumbered her with an uneven floor. (Millard)

Millard's concern is a reflection of how, in contemporary culture, disability is predominantly perceived as a lack of able-bodiedness which renders the disabled unable to negotiate the world around them. Caroline McGinn, on the other hand, perceives the casting of the show to be a specific strategy. In writing for *Time Out: London*, she states, "The casting of disabled actors as the victim, Cate (Jennifer Jay Ellison) and the avenging Soldier (David Toole) makes visible sense of the logic of violence: Ian is punished by someone even more brutalized than Cate" (McGinn). However, despite the polarization in their opinions of the casting, both critics identify the character of Cate as a victim in spite of the power that she gains in the latter third of the play. Furthermore, they both stress that Ellison's physical manifestation of disability enhances the victim-like portrayal of the character. The critics' comments thus reflect the complexity of the theatrical frame that Sealey employs in this production.

The casting of the Graeae Theatre Company production also interrogates and challenges the notion of aesthetic distance in the context of representational theatre.

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[4] The Graeae Theatre Company does not publish the medical terminology of specific disabilities to avoid the public defining actors by their disabilities.

Aesthetic distance can and has been interpreted from several different vantage points. For this analysis, the term aesthetic distance will be used to describe the distance between the subjective reality of the individual spectator and the perceived objective reality of the work of art. As Oswald Hanfling suggests in his article "Paradoxes of Aesthetic Distance," this distance is created by and manipulated through technical and artistic strategies both within the work of art and surrounding it in order to differentiate it from reality. Hanfling identifies five central types of aesthetic distance: "(1) distance from the practical, (2) between the feelings of fictional characters and those of the audience, (3) between art and reality, (4) between the work and its audience, and (5) between the work and the artist" (Ferris 58-59). Meanwhile, Harlan Hahn's study on the reception of the disabled body in public demonstrates the discomfort which able-bodied people often

> feel around people with disabilities: existential and aesthetic anxiety. Existential anxiety refers to the perceived threat that a disability could interfere with functional capacities thought necessary for a satisfactory life. Aesthetic anxiety refers to fears of bodily difference, reflected in a propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes. (58)

Jim Ferris's assessment of aesthetic distance in *Do you sleep in that thing* (1992) offers some valuable insights into the reception of Graeae's production of *Blasted* by negotiating the points of intersection between Hanfling's theory of distance and Hahn's theory of the public reception of the disabled body. Ferris's argument combines these concepts of aesthetic distance and existential/aesthetic anxiety. His thesis centers on the notion that, due to the anxieties experienced by the spectators when viewing a disabled

body (as delineated by Hahn), the five types of aesthetic distance (as outlined by Hanfling) are blurred and become difficult if not impossible to negotiate (59).

Additionally, in his essay on the five types of aesthetic distance, Hanfling proposes that one of the key conditions that allow enjoyment for the spectator upon viewing a work of art is distance (176). When the spectator/reader is unable to establish distance from the work of art, Hanfling argues that they cannot enjoy it because they are unable to view it in aesthetic terms. Ferris' development of Hanfling's theory posits that when a body with a physical disability is used onstage to artistically represent a character, it blurs the line between the practical and the aesthetic: "This blurring is valuable not just because it calls into question the conventional distinctions between character and actor but because it helps focus attention on expectations that so often go unquestioned" (59). Since the physical manifestation of disability is read on the body of the actor, it conflates aesthetic distance and does not allow the spectator to detach from the work due to physical and social anxieties surrounding the performance of disability, both in the theatre and within society. The use of a disabled body in onstage representation prevents the audience from entering fully into the imaginary world presented because it serves as a constant reminder of reality within the imaginary and calls attention to the actor performing a role. Moreover, the manifest physical disability of the actor limits the body's representative potential in terms of character because of its inescapable presence and its perceived limitations.

In addition to the representational factors described above, leading disability performance theorist Rosmarie Garland Thomson asserts that there is an ingrained social taboo about staring at people with disabilities (31). This taboo tends to influence the

spectator's reading of the work because they can experience a discomfiting emotional and/or physical response to the act of staring at and examining individuals with physical disabilities whom they have been socially conditioned to look beyond.

Traditionally, performances employing disabled actors have been perceived as existing adjacent to and separate from aesthetic performance practices. The artistic work of individuals with disabilities was, and still primarily is, received as a therapeutic exercise designed to elicit sympathy and/or compassion. Within contemporary Western society, images of perfect, functional bodies feature almost exclusively in the media and in performance. Petra Kuppers points out the irony between disabled performance and the able-bodied performance of disability when she writes that

> Performers can perform disability, and this performance has currency, tradition and weight in the social sphere of popular culture: film actors playing disabled characters have carried off a number of Oscars, making it seem that acting disabled is the highest achievement possible. (12)

As evidenced in Kuppers' statement, it is the distance between the reality of the performer and the character he/she is portraying which is given artistic and aesthetic weight. When the distance between the imaginary enactment and the performance of disability disappears, the artistic accolades and aesthetic value also tend to dissipate. Thus, as the extraordinary body is usually excluded from dominant modes of representation.

Now, let us discuss how these many ways of collapsing distance and creating aesthetic and existential anxiety are used by Sealey to disrupt the spectator's conditioned response to Blasted. Through her casting, Sealey frames the production of *Blasted* in

such a manner that the division between the practical and aesthetic is impossible for the audience to discern and the boundaries of aesthetic binaries are blurred. This is certainly the case in Sealey's casting of Jennifer Jay Ellison as Cate because the character has a speech impairment. In her study of speech defects in performance, Brenda Jo Brueggemann looks at the audience reception of Neil Marcus' performance of *Storm Reading* in 1988 (produced by Access Theatre Inc.) in which Marcus, a renowned playwright and performance artist, who has dystonia (resulting in severe speech and motion disabilities), spends ninety minutes attempting to speak coherently. She describes the reactions as,

> [T]hey are embarrassed for Marcus as a spectacle onstage; sheepishly but honestly, they also admit that they are embarrassed for themselves in feeling so embarrassed for Marcus. They express frustration at being "forced" to watch and listen to this spectacle. (21)

Brueggemann's report of the discomfiting spectatorial perception of stuttering is echoed in the Millard and McGinn's reviews I discussed earlier, exemplifying how Jennifer Jay Ellison's performance of Cate illustrates the blurring of the practical and aesthetic and demonstrating the implications of casting an actor with a physical manifestation of disability. In this production of *Blasted*, the spectators are obviously aware that the company has disabled performers. However, this straight-forward information is complicated by the fact that the character of Cate is specifically written as having a speech defect. Given Ellison's physical disability, there is potential confusion over whether the speech impediment is real (one that Jennifer Jay Ellison has) or theatrical (one that she is putting on as part of her portrayal of the character). Therefore, the

audience is presented with a confounding, unknown entity as they are unable to ascertain the extent of separation between the actor and character both in terms of the stutter as well as Ellison's physical disability, and thus the aesthetic distance is collapsed. On the primary level of the dramatic text, we can hypothesize that Kane writes the character of Cate to potentially disturb the spectator by creating a character with speech defects. The use of a stuttering character exploits both the spectator's existential and aesthetic anxieties (as developed by Harlan Hahn). Throughout Scene One Cate struggles to speak in response and defense to Ian's ever increasing vulgarity and demands:

> CATE. I-I-Ian.
>
> IAN. What's the m-m-mater?
>
> CATE. I k-k-kissed you, that's all. I l-l-like you.
>
> IAN. Don't give me a hard-on if you're not going to finish me off. It hurts. (15)

The concept of aesthetic anxiety is embedded in the text as Ian taunts Cate with her inability to speak. His words and actions illustrate the marginalization of the disabled individual within society and the shunning of those who are unable to articulate or act within the parameters of normative vocal/physical actions. In addition to the social taboos which Ian breaches in Graeae's staging of *Blasted* (mocking a disabled person, making racist slurs, sexually assaulting Cate, etc.), an existential anxiety also emerges since Cate's speech disorder suggests that she has difficulty communicating which, in turn, hampers her social navigation. These aesthetic and existential anxieties arise from the initial blurring of the separation between actor/character and the decreasing measure of distance that exists between the spectator and the action portrayed onstage.

These anxieties are exacerbated further since Ellison's body appears physically fragile and she has a movement disorder which requires her to wear leg supports and causes her to have an uneven and unstable gait. Her costume—a dress that falls above the knee—further highlights the braces on her legs and makes no attempt to conceal the physical manifestation of her disability. This suggests to the audience that she is unable to move easily throughout the stage space, making the audience nervous (as cited earlier with the Millard quotation). Extrapolating from Brueggemann's description of the audience reaction to a disabled actor, one can easily imagine the aesthetic and existential anxieties that would arise in the spectators as Ellison not only precariously navigates the stage throughout Scene One, but also repeatedly stutters in response to Ian's demands. Ellison's performance demonstrates not only that she is an actor performing a character, but also that she is a woman with a highly visible physical disability. This is a direct contradiction of the primary model of disability performance which asks the audience to look past the disability and emphasizes the capability of the disabled individual to negotiate the world as if they were an able-bodied individual. In this production, however, the audience is forced to witness Ellison's physical struggle in moving across the stage. It is her inability to move easily, and the ongoing suspense for audience members of whether or not she will stumble or fall, that heightens their existential nervousness for Ellison. Moreover, as Garland Thomson asserts, individuals are socially conditioned not to stare, especially at an individual with a disability attempting to navigate space unaided. However, with Ellison's portrayal of Cate, they are being allowed and invited – some might even say forced – to stare. This interrogation of the

spectator's gaze is contrary to the traditional audience-actor relationship in which the audience is considered to have a privileged position as spectators in the world of theatre.

The audience's reception of the material is further challenged by Sealey's casting of David Toole as the Soldier. Toole's physical appearance is truly exceptional in the realm of mainstream aesthetic theatre as he is of very short stature, does not have legs and does not wear prosthetic limbs. The visual image of Toole onstage presents a multitude of challenges to the audience, both separate from and in conjunction with his characterization. First and foremost, as in the case of Ellison, he is performing without attempting to mask or overcome his disability; however, due to the extreme physical manifestation of his disability, the reception of the audience is further unsettled. The dominant social discourse in the western world regarding the absence of limbs is to locate the individual in the realm of severe disability and read the absence as a lack or a loss. In turn, this loss usually invokes pity or compassion in the observer and the disabled individual is perceived to have an unreadable or stunted inner state that matches their exterior (Kuppers 53). With regard to Toole's very short stature, individuals with this disability are usually perceived as either child-like or freaks due to their size (Fielder 58). Thus, Toole's stature and lack of legs, combined with his playing the role of the Soldier in *Blasted*, socio-semiotically presents a confounding image to the audience.

In dominant representational narratives soldiers are primarily depicted in one of two ways: either as wounded or dead but still heroic victims, or as physically fit super-individuals fighting to uphold freedom and democracy. British audiences tend to get quite upset when soldiers are depicted in any other way. For example, in 2006 the British public expressed moral outrage at the publicly-funded performance art piece by

Mark McGowan called "Dead Soldier." The performance featured McGowan dressed in army fatigues and a red beret curled in the fetal position, lying as if dead, in Needless Avenue in Birmingham while the British military was intervening in Iraq. This act was interpreted as "sickening" in *The Sun* (Wheeler), while the BBC conducted a public survey on the streets to see if there was any meaning to be ascertained from McGowan's performance. The survey revealed that the majority of people encountering McGowan found his performance pointless at best, while most used the words disgraceful and sickening (BBC Birmingham: The Dead Soldier). The image of the physically fit McGowan playing the role of a weak, fallen soldier on national soil, in *the aptly-named* Needless Avenue, was perceived as being in poor taste and in turn was rejected by the majority of the public and deemed a fraudulent work of art.

This performance art piece by McGowan clearly relies on the dominant representational models used to depict soldiers in Britain. Typically, soldiers must either be represented as being valiantly alive, defending the country, or heroically injured and/or dead, having fought for their country. These expectations of what a soldier represents and how they are represented in popular culture are disrupted by Toole's appearance, as Toole's physical body presents both a startling contradiction and correlation to the character he depicts. His size and physicality suggest that he could never be a soldier. However, his lack of legs is consistent with representations of wounded amputees, and thus the audience is faced with an irreconcible image. Sealey uses Toole's physical body onstage to create a multifaceted portrayal of the Soldier and collapses the usual distance spectators would expect in the theatre. From Scene Two through to Scene Four, the Soldier torments and attacks Ian while recounting violent acts

he has committed in the war, such as, "Saw a child with most of his face blown off, young girl I fucked hand up inside her trying to claw my liquid out, starving man eating his dead wife's leg" (Kane 50). The Soldier's role in the play culminates with him raping Ian at gunpoint and then shooting himself in the head. While in Kane's text the character is clearly psychologically traumatized, in Toole's performance this distorted interiority can also be read as being manifested in his physical body. Due to his physical appearance the distinction between the character's and actor's mental states is erased to a certain extent. Similar to the role of hyper-text, the actor's physical manifestation of disability becomes a hyper-body of the character he is portraying. However, this depiction also plays into the general public's ignorant but automatic assumption that physical deformity equals psychological disturbance and Sealey uses Toole's body to purposefully play into this stereotype. Toole's performance also calls into question the audience's expectations regarding soldiers and war as his body can be read as broken and defeated rather than as a defender of the good and the true. Sealey's choice to cast Toole in this role erases the distance between the actor and character, art and reality, and the practical from the aesthetic. The physical presence of Toole's body onstage obstructs the audience's attempts to read the character of the Soldier or Toole's performance of him in binary terms of character/actor because the aesthetic distance is alternately expanded and conflated. It has an alienating effect on the audience as it forces them to simultaneously recognize the performance and the way in which Toole reinforces the social perceptions of extreme physical disability.

In contrast to the expressed fascination with Ellison's and Toole's physical manifestations of disability none of the reviews cite Gerard McDermott's (Ian) sensory

impairment as a factor in the performance. While McDermott's sight impairment would have affected his navigation of the stage, it is not as physically evident onstage and therefore does not present any obvious or immediate threat to the spectators' expectations. Therefore, he appears to not contribute to the provocation/discomfort incited by the other actors' disabilities to the same extent. As a sensory impairment is not as easily read on the body it is likely that audience did not have any existential or aesthetic anxiety surrounding his performance. In turn, the reviewers expressed none of the concern and/or fascination that they did with Ellison and Toole.

The Graeae Theatre Company's staging not only uses unusual casting choices to re-radicalize Kane's play, but also goes back to her originally violent dramatic text and finds newly provocative ways to present these textual strategies onstage. For instance, the author's note for *Blasted* includes an unusual comment from Kane which reads "Stage directions in brackets ( ) function as lines" (Kane 2). The company interprets this note in an unusual and exciting manner: the actors and audio interpreters read these stage directions, which further unsettles established theatrical codes and narrative continuity and therefore heightens the discomfort of the audience. Commenting on the difficulties presented in staging Kane's plays, David Greig writes in the introduction to the collected plays:

> Kane believed passionately that if it was possible to imagine something, it was possible to represent it. By demanding an interventionist and radical approach from her directors she was forcing them to go to the limits of their theatrical imagination, forcing them into poetic and expressionist

> solutions. Her stage imagery poses no problems for theatre per se, only for a theatre tied to journalistic naturalism. (xiii)

The Graeae's staging of *Blasted* uses the strategy of intermediality to *"push the limits of their theatrical imagination"* and create a multi-layered and complex aesthetic frame through which to read the production. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenblatt define intermediality as "a space where boundaries soften – and we are in-between and within a mixing of spaces, media and realities" (12). The concept of intermediality is closely connected to the theory of polysemy that I explored in the first chapter. Sealey's mise en scène utilizes this concept of intermediality: in addition to casting disabled actors in the roles of Cate, Ian and the Soldier, she also integrates sign language and audio interpreters into the performance. The sign language interpreters are projected onto a screen onstage, and the live audio interpreters, who are heard but never seen in the performance, have their voices amplified and projected throughout the auditorium as they read all of the stage directions while also describing the visual action taking place onstage. There are three different sign language interpreters used throughout the play to reflect shifts in power dynamics between the characters onstage. The first interpreter resembles Ian and is present until the end of Scene Two. He is then replaced with an interpreter resembling the Soldier until the character's death in the middle of Scene Four when an interpreter resembling Cate takes over for the remainder of the performance. Each projected interpreter signs the lines for every character onstage and physically mirrors the posture and facial expressions of the character for whom they are interpreting while also including some commentary on the onstage action.

This creates an intermedial space, as Sealey is blurring the boundaries between accessibility and aesthetics, reality and theatre, and actor and character, while mixing spaces and media such as live onstage/live onscreen, visual action/aural description/visual description through signing, and disabled/able-bodied. This simultaneous conflation and expansion of meaning provides great potential for instigating thought in the audience and eliciting a strong reaction.

It is important to note that the resemblance between the characters and interpreters is created through the use of similar costumes and facial features; however, none of the interpreters has any obvious physical manifestation of disability. The juxtaposition of their normative bodies against the "abnormal" bodies of the actors onstage further exacerbates existential and aesthetic anxieties in the audience as it forces them to choose a specific focal point. The spectator is constantly being confronted with the choice to either watch the physically disabled actors (apparently) struggle to perform, or to focus on the more aesthetically pleasing images of the sign language interpreters. While the spectator occupies a privileged position in the theatrical hierarchy, this pluri-focal strategy interrogates the quality and value of this privilege. The use of actors with "abnormal" bodies introduces the notion of staring into the receptive relationship so that in addition to being a spectator, the audience member potentially becomes aware that they are an individual actively staring at the display (rather than the representation) of "abnormal" bodies they have been socially conditioned to look past. In this case, the intention of creating accessibility carries the added weight of aesthetic meaning which directly confronts the social taboo of staring at individuals with a physical disability.

This innovative strategy of incorporating sign language and audio interpreters within the body of the performance text collapses the distinctions between the practical (accessibility for the hearing and visually impaired) and the aesthetic aspects of the performance, thus creating an intermedial performance. This articulation of the action makes an explicit and direct connection with the audience. Moreover, the interpreters offer a unique way of staging an extremely problematic text. For example, the stage direction which reads, "The Soldier puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye" (50) is inherently problematic to stage. In the Graeae production, the actors mimed the actions onstage while the stage directions were read (Walsh) and thus the seemingly impossible stage directions were given a viable and inventive mode of representation that extends, as David Greig proposes, beyond the strictures of realism. Moreover, this strategy reframes this iconic violent theatrical moment in such a different manner that it initiates a new reading of Kane's canonical text in performance, showing the power and potential of using intermedial strategies.

The strength of intermedial techniques lies in their ability to further fracture theatrical semiotic codes and perceived social norms. The aesthetic implications of this performance strategy extend far beyond the immediate concerns of accessibility. Sealey's choice to depict some of the most graphic moments of violence through the articulation of stage directions subverts the audiences' expectations for *Blasted* which, in earlier British productions, featured explicit, graphic violence onstage. For example, the choice to mime the action of eating the baby instead of realistically representing it also liberates the spectator to read the event within the context of the entire mise en scène

rather than focusing on the specific graphic, violent act. This strategy of articulating stage directions also alters the typical representational code of theatre as it simultaneously presents the actors' disabled bodies and represents the action onstage using a multiplicity of semiotic levels. The complex combination of presentation, display of interpretative meaning (sign and audio interpreters) and representation (actors playing the characters) used in staging a phenomenologically vandalistic play resists the spectator reading the work from a fixed subject position as it actively works to continually unsettle their semiotic and phenomenological reading of the performance text. Peter Boesnich posits that,

> (i)ntermedial theatrical performances activate the observers, who become invited (some will complain that they are left) to find their own paths through the pluri-focal networks of signs, worlds and meanings offered by the performances, often without being closed in the single *unanimous meaning.* (115)

In the case of *Blasted*, the activation of the audience through the interplay with intermedial performance strategies could have the potential to break the spectators out of their usual complacency and challenges them to question their social perceptions of disability and the canonical text of *Blasted.*

These intermedial aspects of the production elicited a polarized reaction from the critics. Sam Marlowe writing for *The Times* says

> This enunciation of the action – a technique pioneered by Graeae – is intended to clarify the play for blind and visually impaired audiences. But slavishly reciting every direction – even instructions to the actors

such as 'doesn't answer' – doesn't seem particularly helpful. Sealey reduces the play's gestural language to a bald account of events. (2007)

In contrast, Ian Shuttleworth for the *Financial Times* states "it offers a rich and fascinating collage" and Caroline McGinn for *Time Out London* writes that "Graeae's astonishingly un-visceral production challenges a few critical perceptions, as well as any you may have about disabled actors and 'accessible' theatre". The critics' responses to this aspect of the performance communicate two distinct perspectives. In the case of Marlowe, he appears to have a very reductive reading of the sign language and audio interpreters as primarily being used to create accessibility with their presence only relevant to sensory impaired spectators, whereas Shuttleworth and McGinn contextualize the interpreters within the larger aesthetic framework of the play. As the critics' comments illustrate, for some viewers the polysemy can be overwhelming and result in a reductive reading. However, the differing reactions to this aesthetic strategy suggest that the complex multi-faceted performance created by Sealey and the Graeae Theatre Company not only resists a codified reading of the performance text but succeeds to a certain extent in reawakening social perceptions regarding disability and revitalizing the reception and reading of *Blasted*.

Since 1999, Sarah Kane's suicide has become a central component in the reading and staging of her play. *Blasted* became a canonical text with which critics and the public alike became enamored. Most especially, everyone became delighted by their ability to withstand the graphic violence depicted onstage, with the result that in a relatively short period of time the play was stripped of its provocative power. However, the Graeae Theatre Company's performance of *Blasted* employs such a multiplicity of

strategies and layers that the spectator and his/her perception of the work is destabilized. By denying the audience a singular accessible subject position in which to locate themselves, Jennifer Sealey's staging infuses the performance and Kane's text with a radically renewed perception of the performance text. In viewing the production, the spectator is left to negotiate his/her own path through the multiple meaning and signs presented onstage, from disabled bodies to the audio interpretation and the live projection of sign language interpreters. Moreover, this navigation extends beyond the typical experience of watching *Blasted* because the use of actors with a manifest physical disability creates aesthetic and existential anxieties in the audience which keeps them in a state of tension and suspense.

It appears that through a complex process of negotiation and the collapse of aesthetic binaries, the politics of perception are brought into the consciousness of the audience. To read the disabled body as the primary signifier is for the spectator to acknowledge his/her own privileged position as a spectator, as well as his/her own existential and aesthetic anxieties. This in turn collapses the binary categories upon which aesthetic distance is based; this is significant because aesthetic distance is often used to determine artistic value and without this distance, the audience is left on their own to decide whether artistic merit is deserved or not based on a very different framework. The Graeae Theatre Company's innovative staging of the canonical text of *Blasted* resists the codified reception it has received over the past eight years and demonstrates the openness of the text to new interpretations. Thus, one realizes that regardless of Sarah Kane's life and death, the text of *Blasted* contains such explosive intrinsic value that it has the ability to provide fodder for many a future performance.

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Conclusion

The early years of the twenty-first century saw a flurry of interest in the work of Sarah Kane. Following her death in 1999, she came to symbolize all of the angst that plagued youth in the 1990s. Kane's work and her life is often perceived as exemplifying the sense of futility which haunts youth in the new millennium, a time in which violence and pain is merely fodder for entertainment and commodity fetishization reigns supreme. In the latter years of the twentieth century and into the opening decade of the twenty first the representations of violence in popular forms of entertainment have become increasingly graphic and explicit; yet, only relatively small numbers object to this brutal aesthetic. This was certainly the case in the positive reception that greeted the majority of In-yer-face theatrical productions in the 1990s in Britain. In cases such as Anthony Neilson's *Penetraror,* Tracy Letts' *Killer Joe*, Phyllis Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* the violent content of their works received critical accolades and/or was ignored by the press. The passive receptive acceptance of the graphic violence contained in these works suggests that British theatre-goers had become virtually immune to the provocative power of theatre. The outraged critical reception in the press of *Blasted* in 1995 more than for any other play at the Royal Court Theatre as well as the Graeae Theatre Company's 2006/07 production, however, suggests that through a precise dramaturgical structure, combined with an innovative mise en scène, art – in this case, theatre – still has the power to disturb and provoke.

Kane's "phenomenologically vandalistic" dramaturgy seeks to attack and subvert the audiences' pre-existing expectations of the theatrical genre. On the occasion of the play's London premiere, the initial outrage expressed in the media by theatre critics

stems largely from the fact that the form of the play and the perceived lack of moral situating for the audience were extremely discontinuous with the critics' expectations. As long as violence is represented within an identifiable moral framework, the spectator is able to observe a critical distance from the representation and subsequently also distance him/herself. When a representation of violence is constructed outside of this moral binary framing, as in the case of *Blasted*, then the spectator is confronted by the proximity of violence and tends to have a more visceral experience. Unused to this lack of distance, the critics reacted strongly to the debut production of *Blasted*.

However, since 1995, *Blasted* has been absorbed into the mainstream, and continues to be produced around the globe. The play that Jack Tinker initially heralded as a "disgusting feast of filth… utterly devoid of merit" has since been cited as a theatrical landmark of the twentieth century. While this thesis has explored the dynamic processes of outraged responses to *Blasted,* this analysis also raises the question of why Kane's work, *Blasted* in particular, has become so rapidly absorbed into the theatrical canon. Despite James Macdonald's initial gritty and visceral interpretation of the text, *Blasted* is now primarily presented as a highly aestheticized and well-received work of art. This is certainly the case in Thomas Ostermeier's renowned staging of text. Ostermeir's production is constantly evolving to include contemporaneous global socio-political issues which feature as projected news footage on a large screen across one section of the set. In this production, the character of Ian appeared quite sophisticated and the Soldier was an overweight, physically unthreatening fifty year old. In surveying reviews of the production, critics seem somewhat surprised by how conversational and innocuous most of the interactions of these two characters appeared. Moreover, the

violence tended to be staged in a contained manner, as critic Andrew Haydon (writing on the British debut of Ostermeier's production) stresses "the sex and violence never threatens to get to be too much as it is tastefully rendered." The production of *Blasted* directed by Sami Ylisaari for Koko Teatteri (Helsinki, Finland) in 2005 also employed a highly aestheticized, technically sophisticated mise en scène featuring graphic representations of violence which was in turn well received by the general public (Fisher). The dramatically different forms of the mise en scène developed by Ostermeier and Ylisaari suggest that *Blasted* is open to contemporary adaptations which can create a mise en scène to tap into current socio-political issues.

Conceptually the mise en scène of Graeae Theatre Company's production, however, is more aligned with the original production as it demonstrates that there is still the potential within Kane's dramaturgical text for provocation. Through Jennifer Sealey's calculated use of actors with physically manifest disabilities in combination with intermedial techniques the production resisted and challenged the codified norms of theatrical performance. Graeae's production shows how it is possible to re-interpret the text and create a performance text which is still discontinuous with the audience's horizons of expectations; this illustrates the strength of the play text, as it can be staged in various creative manifestations that mine new depths of its violent and provocative potential.

Western society has an ongoing preoccupation with representations of violence and violent forms of entertainment. As Mark Reinhardt and Jeffrey Goldstein identify, individuals constantly flock towards gruesome events and images, eager to voyeuristically experience others' pain and suffering. There is an ongoing debate in the

public sphere that questions the purpose and merit of staging graphic and explicit representations of violence. The diachronic and synchronic reception of *Blasted* offers some key insights into the reception of extreme representations of violence onstage and the kinds of negotiation it requires from a live audience. At a time when all social interactions are dominated and controlled by sign systems which in turn have supplanted the Real, perhaps the greatest merit of a work of art lies in its ability to revitalize our perceptions of the world we live in. Within this context then Kane's *Blasted* surely deserves merit as a great work of art. Although thirteen years after its debut performance *Blasted* has lost some of its original perceptive punch, we have seen through the example of the Graeae Theatre Company that there are multiple interpretations and re-imaginings possible given the layered and complex nature of Kane's script. In following with Shlovsky's strategy of ostranenie which suggests that one of the fundamental purposes of art is to revitalize the beholder's perception of a given event or object, then exploring the complex and dynamic receptive process reveals strategic possibilities for renewing the audiences' politics of perception.

Audience reception studies in theatre are an extremely open field which hosts a multiplicity of perspectives and approaches. In spite of their diverse methodologies reception studies share the fundamental question of discovering how, why and to what a specific audience reacts. The methodological approach this thesis developed for the receptive analysis of *Blasted* utilizes a semiotic and phenomenological reading of the performance text in combination with an analysis of the reception material and situated within its socio-political-historical context. This approach facilitates the exploration of the complex interplay between the mise en scene and the audience within the larger

context of socio-cultural sign systems. This multi-faceted approach incorporates areas of receptive inquiry which are often studied in isolation to create an awareness and offer insights into the complex systems of the receptive process and Kane's dramaturgy. While this approach offers numerous unique insights into the receptive process and the navigation of social cultural structures it is a relatively new approach which does have some limitations as archival resources of the initial production are minimal and using solely critical press reviews for receptive data presents a very specific receptive perspective. In the case of *Blasted* in 1995 the investigation of the theatre critics' negative reactions to the press is invaluable, since it is an event in theatrical history which is repeatedly referenced but has been the focus of relatively little academic inquiry. Within the field of reception studies, this targeted type of analysis contributes to a stronger overall understanding of theatre and its reception as a cultural product. Whereas, in the case of the Graeae Theatre Company's 2006/07 production the receptive analysis conducted in this thesis has revealed numerous other pathways of potential research. For instance, the reception of actors with physically manifest disabilities is an extremely new and exciting are of academic and artistic exploration. Moreover, their development of accessibility elements (for the hearing and visually impaired) into aesthetic strategies in exceptional in Western mainstream theatre and an in depth analysis of the reception has yet to be explored. In terms of academic inquiry, performances of *Blasted* continue to hold great potential for groundbreaking work. As *Blasted* is often heralded as one of the most significant British plays of the twentieth century, understanding and analyzing the social processes that led to both the initial outrage and

ensuing institutional co-option of work reveal the complexity and possibilities of the theatrical enterprise.

In the final moments of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* as vultures begin to eat his intestines, Hippolytus utters the now infamous line "If there could have been more moments like these" (103) in reference to his desire for more moments of completely new, honest and visceral experiences. Although, typically the irony of this phrase tends to be superseded by the graphic violence at work onstage, it offers a pointed parallel to the diachronic reception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Initially extremely provocative for audiences, following her death critics and audiences alike have circled like vultures to pick clean her legacy and moved to absorb her works into the theatrical canon. For as painful and raw the initial production of *Blasted* was, it elicited an undeniably visceral and strong reaction in the audience, a reception which remains unparalleled since 1995. One cannot help but wish, as Hippolytus does, that there will be been more moments in the theatre like those surrounding the debut production of *Blasted* in 1995.

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